Disruptive Attitudes

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Disruptive Attitudes

Artists Counter the Art of Exhibiting in the Low Countries (1985-1991)

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VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT

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INTRODUCTION

Prologue: Setting the Stage

In the years that just precede the focus of this dissertation, in Flanders and the Netherlands it was common for artists to take it upon themselves to create opportunities to show their work.[1] Frequently this involved the readying of artist-run spaces that offered an alternative to established and exclusionary institutions. On June 12, 1982 a performance took place in Amsterdam that exemplifies the prevailing vitality and earnestness of such artist-run spaces. That evening, more than four-hundred visitors streamed through the doors of Aorta, an art space located in the former rotary press hall of the Algemeen Handelsblad complex at Spuistraat 189.[2] The crowd had arrived for the opening of *Beeldstroom*, Aorta's inaugural exhibition – an "art exploration/exposition/explosition" that included works by 78 artists in a broad range of mediums, bound only by a shared sense of 'energy' and a connection to the site.[3] Just above their heads, Peter Giele – the artist who most spiritedly led the charge to realize the event – was engaged in a performance he entitled '*The artist dreaming of his own reality*'. Covered only by a sheet, with boots planted to his side, Giele lay fast asleep, stretched out on a wooden door suspended above the crowd by steel cables (fig. 1).

In the Netherlands, as in Flanders, an upsurge in platforms like Aorta, where artists could make and show their work, took place in the years surrounding 1980.[4] This was not the first moment in which artists had taken to organizing their own exhibitions – after all, in Amsterdam, Arti et Amicitiae was founded in 1839 with this intent. [5] Nonetheless, in the early 1980s, artists made use of what resources they had at their disposal to contend with the obstacles they faced in reaching a public. Underutilized buildings, from Amsterdam to Antwerp, offered artists a great deal of freedom to determine the conditions under which they could exhibit their work in what would later come to be referred to as artists' initiatives – though this particular form of autonomy did not come easily and often did not last long.

In Aorta, the abandoned industrial site proved ideal for sizeable works and ambitious exhibitions, though it called for substantial renovations. The effort had been so great that Giele collapsed on the door, dirty and covered in sweat, five minutes before the exhibition was to open:

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[1] Lilian Boes and Yve De Vries, "Kunstenaarsinitiatieven", in *Vrij Spel: Nederlandse Kunst 1970-1990*, Willemijn Stokvis and Kitty Zijlmans (eds), Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1993: 221-237; Koen Brams and Dirk Pültau, "1980. Gesprek met Walter Van Rooy", *De Witte Raaf*, edition 112, Nov/Dec 2004. Accessed through: dewitteraaf.be/artikel/detail/nl/2863. Koen Brams and Dirk Pültau, "Omstreeks 1980, in (en buiten) Antwerpen. Interview met Ria Pacquée / Ruimte Z Aksent (1982-1983)", *De Witte Raaf*, edition 138, March/April 2009. Accessed through: dewitteraaf.be/artikel/detail/nl/3395; Diana Franssen, "Artists' Initiatives in the Netherlands", in: *The Long 1980s: Constellations of Art, Politics and Identities*, Nick Aikens, et al. (eds), Amsterdam: Valiz, 2018: 354-355.

[2] Aorta was founded by Peter Giele, Aldert Mantje, and William Lindhout in the squatted 900 square-meter space of the abandoned Algemeen Handelsblad Complex. Wim van Sinderen, "Het Beeld Stroomt Daar, Waar het niet gaan kan Aorta", *Vinyl*, vol. 30, no. 3, Nov. 1983: 20-21. Giele later claimed there were 700 guests at the opening. Peter Giele, "De Openbaring", *De Groene Amsterdammer*, vol. 123, no. 21, 26 May 1999. Accessed through: groene.nl/artikel/de-openbaring--3.

[3] Exhibition posters read "*Beeldstroom*: Kunstexploratie/expositie/explositie". As Giele explains in the documentary *Van een andere orde: Portret van een mentaliteit*, 'energy' was felt more important than expertise in the 1980s. Rob Schröder, VPRO (1997) 65 min. A 'connection to the site' entailed that the work had been produced in the space, or was in some way specific to the context of *Beeldstroom*, and therefore could not be extracted to be shown in another setting. The 78 works were not shown at once; over its three-month duration artworks were replaced every two to three weeks.

[4] By the time Aorta came into being, in Amsterdam alone a handful of non-commercial exhibition spaces run by artists were already in operation. Artist-run spaces also flourished farther afield in the Netherlands (especially in those cities with an art academy). An upswing can be seen around 1980, with a peak in 1983. In Belgium, there was an explosion of platforms around 1980, especially in Antwerp. Some of these can be considered commercial galleries, but artists, nonetheless, played a significant role in programming. For a list of artist-run spaces and galleries in operation in Flanders and the Netherlands founded in the long 1980s see **Appendix A**.

[5] On the origins of Arti et Amicitiae see: Clarissa Christina Wesselink, *Kunstenaars van de Kultuurkamer: Geschiedenis en herinnering*, PhD dissertation, University of Amsterdam, 2014: 90-93.

"I fell asleep immediately," Giele explained in an interview. "I had no interest in shaking hands."[6] The artist hadn't slept for three days in a final push to complete renovations in time for the opening. Preparing and promoting the launch of Aorta had left him utterly exhausted; by inserting his body into the exhibition he put on view the physical evidence of his fatigue. In the process, the line between artistic intent and pure necessity was made fuzzy. Entitled *The artist dreaming of his own reality*, Giele's performance was repeatedly photographed and featured in reviews of the opening, an emblematic image for Aorta where the energy of artists was called upon to fuel the production of exhibitions.[7] This was to be a place where artists would determine what to show and how it would be shown without the interference of mediators.[8] Yet as the performance suggested, such a reality would only be made possible through the substantial investment of artists' labor – a conviction that can be sensed in many of Giele's performances and future endeavors.[9]

The photogenic nature of the performance was also indicative of Giele's zeal for promotional antics. He sought the attention of as broad a public as possible to cross barriers that were perceived as standing between artists and non-artists.[10] Rather than build another silo for artistic autonomy, Aorta facilitated interaction between social spheres and artistic disciplines. Polluting art with entertainment or politics was therefore encouraged, and as a large audience was easier to come by through press coverage, promotion was a priority.[11] Such an entreaty to media attention was considered by some to impinge upon the goals of artists' initiatives – particularly from the perspective of those working in spaces like Amsterdam's W139, where there was a more stringent code of ethics intended to isolate artists from the potentially corruptive influence of self-promotion.[12] Yet for Giele, as an artist and organizer, the roles were frequently blurred, and exposure was essential.

From the start, Aorta was a collaborative environment, where artists could work alongside one another to prepare exhibitions. The organization of extraordinary or outsized 'live exhibitions' in the space, and the integration of various forms of art, were among its official directives.[13] Production and display were thus closely intertwined. According to Giele, a well-renovated building was integral to setting the stage for such a mode of production.[14] He reasoned that a presentation space painted white

[6] Wim van Sinderen, "Het Beeld Stroomt Daar, Waar het niet gaan kan Aorta", *Vinyl*, vol. 30, no. 3, Nov. 1983: 20-21. Giele: "Ik sliep gelijk. Ik had geen zin om handjes te schudden, dit was mijn manier om de ruimte aan de mensen te geven."

[7] Wim van Sinderen's already cited article in *Vinyl* magazine (1983) is one example. Theo Temmink, "Aorta zoekt het midden tussen plan en anarchie", *de Volkskrant*, 24 Sept 1982: 17, is another.

[8] As is made clear in a press release that accompanied the reopening of the space in 1983, after a temporary closure for further renovations. Aorta Press release, December 1983, see RKD, Archief Kunsthandel: Amsterdam, Aorta, box 1 of 1.

[9] The spaces Giele founded were renowned for the counter-cultural freedom they provided. This was true of Aorta and to a greater extent, Club RoXY, a nightclub he opened with Arjen Schrama and Eddy de Clerq in 1987. The RoXY gained international recognition for its theatrical atmosphere and glamorous parties. It brought together artists of every discipline as the center of Amsterdam's burgeoning DJ scene in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

[10] This ambition was already apparent in Giele's work from 1979. For *Tutti Frutti*, an exhibition of young Amsterdam-based artists at Museum Fodor, Giele's intervention involved constructing a window in the wall that divided the museum gallery from the hallway of the Leefwerk Kommune Keizersgracht next door. Showing his penchant for constructing stages and fusing social spheres, he created a porthole between the buildings with a plexiglass sheet. Visitors could peer through it into the daily actions of those living in the commune (of which Giele was one). He thus poked a hole in the hermetic space of art, corrupting it with the profane activities of the (otherwise) private sphere. See: Harry Heyink, et al. (eds), *Peter L.M. Giele: Verzamelende Werken*, Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Aksant, 2003: 4. For more on the events of *Tutti Frutti,* see: Martijn Haas, *SKG*, Amsterdam: Lebowski Publishers, 2010: 11-17.

[11] Huub Mous, "Homeward bound: The domestication of art in the eighties", *kunst & museumjournaal*, vol. 7, no. 1/2/3, 1996: 45. Writing on the institutionalization of artists' initiatives, Mous explains that the press attention for contemporary art in the 1980s reached new heights, as did business interest in supporting art. These developments went hand in hand with a growing audience for art – partly a result of an increasingly educated public. This he calls art's 'social breakthrough'.

[12] Tineke Reijnders, "Met hamer en lef", *De Groene Amsterdammer*, no. God Save the Queen, 1 March 2012: 40-43.

[13] Aanvraag voor subsidie voor een experimenteel kunstvernieuwend project, 24 Aug 1982. Oprichtingsakte van de stichting, article 2, 15 March 1982: 1, see RKD, Archief Kunsthandel: Amsterdam, Aorta, box 1 of 1. 'Live exhibitions' were those in which the works to be shown were made unequivocally for the space, and the artists involved would frequently be present during the exhibition. This enabled visitors to come into direct contact with the artists and their working processes.

[14] Tineke Reijnders, "Het Handelsbladkomplex als kunstenaarparadijs", *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 7 July 1982: 17. Giele: "Voor mijzelf is het werken aan de ruimte een essentieel onderdeel van de gehele manifestatie. Ik bedoel zelfs dat de idee achter Aorta en de totale uitvoering van dit project een essentieel deel van mijn kunst is. Ik bedoel met het slaan van de hamer, het hijsen aan de takel, het strijken van de kwast voel ik

and free from obtrusive visual distractions allowed artists to work with a clear mode of address.[15] Yet it also brought the appearance of Aorta's interior in line with the very institutions it sought to distance itself from. This was not by mistake. When it felt less like a factory, and more like a place in which one would expect to encounter art, Aorta stood to capture some of the aura felt to be lacking in exhibition spaces typical of the alternative circuit.[16] The space would be taken more seriously, as would the art to be shown there. That Giele more than once decried the museum for using its authority to designate 'art as art', and at the same time was resolute that Aorta employ a museum-like aesthetic, borrowing from the symbolic power of that apparatus, can easily be seen as a contradiction.[17] This propensity to appropriate 'serious' display aesthetics mimicked the conventional white cube gallery without challenging its authority.

Most of the artists that participated in Aorta's early live exhibitions invested in works that would stand out against the vast space of the rotary hall, and among their peers. For Giele, the goal was different: Aorta – named for the main artery that carries blood from the heart, the lifeline of the body – was itself his creation. Occupying the site and all that was entailed in its construction: renovating, publicizing, pursuing all potential sources of funding, was a creative act as much as a rebellion against extant institutions for art's presentation.[18] There was no necessary distinction to be made between Aorta and his individual practice. By identifying his activities as an artist with the work involved in founding and maintaining Aorta, Giele brought attention to the podium where artists, artworks, and their public came together.

However, given that a group exhibition is by nature an aggregation of artists' labor – a collective display of material production – to take authorship over an exhibition platform is also to appropriate the labor of others.[19] While Giele acted as a catalyst, facilitating the exhibition of many artists, he also built upon their production. As such, Giele trapped himself in a paradox that often plagued artists seeking alternative exhibition platforms in the early-1980s. He carved out a path for fellow artists to make and present work to a public without yielding to the demands of the market or the expectations of critics and museums.[20] He devoted himself intensively to the project and rejected dogmatic principles that would limit forms of expression from being granted exposure. He did not speak to the intentions of the works, or other artists. Yet his close association with Aorta nevertheless risked the aesthetic autonomy of the artworks shown there, and led to the stagnation of his own creative practice as he was pushed further into the role of producer.[21] Likewise, the disavowal of art's more conventional institutions while simultaneously appropriating their installation aesthetic, would merely appear to trade one authority for another. Aorta's progression from an informal space for marginalized artists to one of relative

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de spieren in mijn lijf. In het regelen, het schrijven van brieven, de konfrontatie [sic] met mensen en in alle beslissingen voel ik mijn hersens bonken."

[15] Cathérine van Houts, "Giele gaat 'historie maken'", *Het Parool*, 11 June 1982: 14. Aorta adhered to some elements of conventional display, which were seen as necessary to engage with the public on a particular register. This has been called evidence of 'domestication'. See Huub Mous, "Homeward bound: The domestication of art in the eighties", *kunst & museumjournaal*, vol. 7, no. 1/2/3, 1996: 31-51.

[16] At the time, artist-run spaces like Aorta were often referred to as part of an 'alternative circuit', which was differentiated from the mainstream, traditional, or normal circuit, comprised of museums and established commercial galleries.

[17] Giele makes his critique of the museum clear in 'Kunst te Koop', an episode of the Flemish television program *IJsbreker*. He found the fetishization of objects on account of their context in a museum to be dishonest, see Jef Cornelis (dir.), *IJsbreker*, episode 04, 'Kunst te Koop', 01:02:38, BRT (Belgian Radio and Broadcast Network), 13 April 1983. In the collection of the Argos Centre for Audiovisual Arts, Brussels.

[18] Tineke Reijnders, "Met hamer en lef", *De Groene Amsterdammer*, no. God Save the Queen, 1 March 2012: 42.

[19] Julian Myers-Szupinska, "Exhibitions as Apparatus", *The Exhibitionist*, issue 13, 2017: 19.

[20] Where Aorta differed from other artists' initiatives was in its apolitical foundations, its intended audience, and the means it employed to gain attention – particularly by engaging with the press. Aorta did not appeal to the cultural elite of the 'official' art scene, and it also did not identify with any one sub-culture – be it punks, anarchists or squatters – though all were among its audience. Whereas Giele's previous projects (like SKG) had appealed to explicitly political positions, he took efforts to distance Aorta from any one movement, in particular from the squatting movement, despite the site having been squatted.

[21] 'Aesthetic autonomy' is used in this dissertation in the sense outlined by Andrea Fraser. She distinguishes it as "the freedom of art works from rationalization with respect to specific use or function, whether moral, economic, political, social, material or emotional", see Andrea Fraser, "Autonomy and Its Contradictions", *Open!*, no. 23, 1 May 2012: 1. Accessed through: onlineopen.org/download.php?id=363 on 1 Sept 2018.

structure and influence will receive more attention in Chapter 1. For now, this brief account of Giele's involvement with Aorta suffices to illustrate the thrust behind artists' ambitions to form their own spaces for presentation – to take control over the conditions of display – and the contradictions they faced in the process.

In the case of artists' initiatives in the Netherlands, their proliferation in the years just prior to the focus of this dissertation was the result of a confluence of factors. Naturally, artists faced a need for studio space, which could be met by utilizing structures (temporarily) left vacant during a period of recession – former schools, factories, or shops.[22] These sites were occupied (sometimes by squatting), and turned into cooperative workspaces. There, artists could pool their financial and productive resources and benefit creatively from the dynamics of working among, and often in collaboration, with others.[23] Yet beyond the practicalities of the workspace, fundamental to artists' initiatives was their potential as exhibition platforms. Having a space to show was critical to an artwork (and by extension to artists), and there was widespread recognition that "the form of presentation reflects and conditions the experience of and thinking about art."[24]

At the same time, with art academies turning out ever-greater numbers of artists, securing opportunities to exhibit in museums or galleries was a competitive venture.[25] This was particularly true for work that posed a challenge to the display methods of conventional institutions; installations or large-scale sculptures, performances, or works in new media, such as video or computer art, found even fewer opportunities.[26] As such, organizing one's own space offered the occasion to present work to a public without having to gain a coveted spot in a museum or gallery exhibition, where the work would in any case be subjected to the whims of exhibition makers and the constraints of the hosting institution.

This is not to suggest that there was a lack of platforms for the presentation of contemporary art in the Netherlands. To the contrary, a relatively high number of museums invested in the presentation of modern and contemporary art were spread throughout the country (particularly compared with neighboring Flanders, a matter which we will come to shortly).[27] Still, in spite of the diversity of art forms being produced at the time, museums, by and large, continued to employ outdated presentation modes that were focused on medium-specific categorization.[28] In the early 1980s painting was notably privileged above other mediums, and artists from abroad (particularly those of American, German, or Italian descent) were often favored in exhibition programs over Dutch artists.[29]

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[22] In the late 1970s and 1980s, the economy was in a state of decline in the Netherlands and Belgium, which resulted in slow structural development. Alan Smart, "Squatting and Media: An Interview with Geert Lovink", in: *Making Room: Cultural Production in Occupied Spaces*, Alan Moore and Alan Smart (eds), Chicago/Los Angeles: Other Forms and the Journal of Aesthetics and Protest, 2015: 58-70.

[23] Lilian Boes and Yve De Vries, "Kunstenaarsinitiatieven", in *Vrij Spel: Nederlandse Kunst 1970-1990*, Willemijn Stokvis and Kitty Zijlmans (eds), Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1993: 221.

[24] Riet de Leeuw, "Inleiding", in: *De Kunst van het tentoonstellen: De presentatie van beeldende kunst in Nederland van 1800 tot heden*, Riet de Leeuw (ed.), Den Haag: Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst/ Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1991: 17. See also: Evelyn Beer and Riet de Leeuw (eds), *L'Exposition imaginaire: The art of exhibiting in the eighties*, The Hague: SDU Uitgeverij, 1989; and Germano Celant, "A Visual Machine: Art Installation and its Modern Archetypes", in: Documenta 7, vol. 2, exh. cat., Kassel: Verlag D + V Paul Dierichs GmbH & Co, 1982: 13-18.

[25] Ton Bevers, *Georganiseerd Cultuur, de rol van de overheid en de markt in de kunstwereld*, Bussum: Dick Coutinho, 1993: 189. Bevers cites a growth in the number of art academies in the Netherlands and its students, from eight art academies in the 1950s with 2,000 students to sixteen academies with 11,000 students in the 1980s.

[26] Lilian Boes and Yve De Vries, "Kunstenaarsinitiatieven", in *Vrij Spel: Nederlandse Kunst 1970-1990*, Willemijn Stokvis and Kitty Zijlmans (eds), Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1993: 222.

[27] Museums that regularly organized exhibitions of contemporary art were a fixture in the Netherlands long before the 1980s. Museums spread throughout the country, such as the Museum Arnhem, Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller Otterlo, Centraal Museum Utrecht, Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, Museum Boijmans-van Beuningen Rotterdam, Groninger Museum Grongingen, Haags Gemeente Museum in Den Haag, Noordbrabants Museum Den Bosch, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, and the Bonnefanten Museum, Maastricht (then housed in the Entre Deux shopping complex placed its main focus on contemporary art from 1986 forward) all maintained a contemporary art program throughout the 1980s. In 1988, the De Pont Museum of Contemporary Art, Tilburg was added.

[28] As evidenced in the exhibitions examined in Chapter 1 (*As Far as Amsterdam Goes…*, 1985) and Chapter 3 (*The Arts for Television*, 1987).

[29] Tineke Reijnders, "Adressen van de autonome geest: kunstenaarsinitiatieven in de jaren tachtig en negentig", in: *Peter L.M. Giele: Verzamelende Werken*, Harry Heyink, et al. (eds), Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Aksant, 2003: 178; Dominic van den Boogerd, "De terugkeer van het schilderen", *De Witte Raaf*, edition 173, Jan/Feb 2015. Accessed through: dewitteraaf.be/artikel/detail/nl/4079. Among those who were given exhibition opportunities in the early 1980s, many were associated with neo-expressionist painting, such as those linked to the label

Aside from museums, the number of commercial galleries dealing with contemporary art also increased in the Netherlands, especially taking off in the latter half of the decade and plateauing after 1990.[30] Independent (non-profit) art spaces without collections tended to focus on the type of artistic practices that were not (yet) embraced by museums, with their primary goal the production of the exhibition or event itself.[31]

If we look at Amsterdam alone, at the time in which Aorta came into being, the Stedelijk Museum occupied the central position as the most prestigious site for contemporary art in the capital. Smaller platforms were strewn throughout the city, each with a particular profile. Commercial galleries that specialized in contemporary art such as Art & Project (1964), Galerie Riekje Swart (1964), Galerie Helen van der Meij (1977 until 1984, when it became the Galerie Paul Andriesse), The Living Room (1981), Galerie Hans Gieles (1984), Torch Gallery (1984), or Lumen Travo (1985), hosted exhibitions of Dutch and international artists, and offered exposure outside the Netherlands. Meanwhile the Museum Fodor, a subsidiary organization under the guidance of the Stedelijk, was responsible for the organization of exhibitions by local artists and the presentation of municipal acquisitions for the Stedelijk collection.[32] Independent presentation spaces such as the aforementioned Arti et Amicitiae, the Goethe Institute/Provisorium, and De Appel (with Time Based Arts established in 1983 as an auxiliary for the support and documentation of video art) also offered prospects for up-and-coming artists to show their work. Still, despite this rather extensive array of institutions, the opportunities they offered did not fully meet the demands, or desires, of artists. The do-it-yourself ambition of a young generation inspired by artistic and social movements of the 1960s collided with a desire to work free from commercial or social obligations. Many artists opted to take exhibition-making into their own hands, coming together to establish platforms where they could stage their work.

In Flanders, the situation was very different, yet the self-organized activity of artists was a shared outcome. The structure of governmental support for artists in Flanders was unlike that available in the Dutch system; subsidies in the Netherlands, such as the Beeldende Kunstenaars Regeling (BKR, Visual Artists' Arrangement) could not be relied upon as a source of income for artists.[33] As a result, the art market was of considerable importance to artists, with Flanders host to an inordinate number of art

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'De Nieuwe Wilden' (regardless of whether the works in question in fact resonated with an international 'style', or if there was anything particularly new about them). With the 'everything goes' mantra of the 1980s, critics tended to essentialize. The complexity of expression in the work of artists like René Daniëls, for example, was largely overlooked. In the early years, they positioned Daniëls in the Nieuwe Wilden camp, despite his use of figuration and metaphor. This was a plight shared by a number of artists in Daniëls' generation, whose work today with the benefit of historical distance can be seen more clearly for the specificity of its approach, and for its critical engagement with the social conditions of the 1980s. For more on painting in the 1980s see: Jeske de Bekker, "De 'nieuwe schilderkunst'", in: *Vrij Spel: Nederlandse Kunst 1970-1990*, Willemijn Stokvis and Kitty Zijlmans (eds), Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1993: 35-54.

[30] Truus Gubbels, *Passie of professie. Galeries en kunsthandel in Nederland*, Abcoude: Uitgeverij Uniepers, 1999: 228.

[31] The Kunstinstituut Melly, formerly known as Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam, is a clear example of this form of exhibition space. Established in 1990, it came into being near the end of the time span focused upon in this dissertation.

[32] Essentially, the Stedelijk ended up outsourcing its responsibilities to support the city's artistic scene to the Fodor, and its small staff. Originally a bequest to the city from the collector Carl Joseph Fodor, the Museum Fodor was designated as an exhibition space for all artists in Amsterdam in 1974. From that time forward it was the organizational, administrative, and financial responsibility of the director of the Stedelijk Museum, who, in turn, delegated this responsibility to the chief curator of Museum Fodor (Tijmen van Grootheest from 1981-1988), and an advisory committee. From 1982, Museum Fodor was responsible for the execution and presentation of the city's municipal art purchases. Many exhibitions of local artists took place during its years of operation, from 1974 to 1992, after which the museum was closed, and its function as a platform for Amsterdam's artists was (at least in part) transferred to the Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam (SMBA). Until 2016, when the SMBA was abruptly closed by the leadership of the Stedelijk Museum without a clear successor. See 'Archief van het Museum Fodor' (1968-1992), Gemeente Amsterdam Stadsarchief, inv. 5446.

[33] The BKR was a social assistance program originally established in 1956 to provide a secure income for participating visual artists (those who met the requirements, such as having a low income and following stricter provisions made in 1972, holding a diploma or certificate from a government-sponsored art education institution by the age of 30). In return, BKR participants were required to provide works of art to municipal collections, which were subject to approval by an appointed committee of evaluators. It is often referred to as the 'contraprestatie', a term that was used for the program that provided monetary aid to artists between 1949-1956. The BKR was dismantled between 1982 and 1986, at which point it was discontinued. More on the BKR will follow in Chapter 1. On the origins of the BKR and the cultural policy decisions that led to its end, see Roel Pots, *Cultuur, koningen en democraten: overheid en cultuur in Nederland*, Amsterdam: Boom, 2000.

collectors.[34] Additionally, a total lack of museums of contemporary art, not only in Flanders but in Belgium as a whole meant a dearth of presentation opportunities – to a far greater degree than in the Netherlands. The first museum to focus solely on contemporary art was the Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst (Museum of Contemporary Art) in Ghent, which was given rein to occupy several galleries of the Museum voor Schone Kunsten (Museum of Fine Arts) in 1975.[35] Before that time, contemporary art in Belgium was shown in venues alternative to museums – the most significant in Flanders being the International Cultural Center (ICC) in Antwerp.[36] This lack of an official infrastructure for contemporary art is said to have resulted in events with only regional significance, leaving those who did receive presentation opportunities to remain in the periphery.[37]

Between the mid-1980s and early 1990s (what I'll refer to from this point forward as the 'late 1980s'), contemporary Belgian art is said to have received its big break.[38] Over the course of the decade, a handful of contemporary art museums were established in the country, among them the Musée d'art moderne (Museum of Modern Art, later known as the Musée d'art moderne et d'art contemporain or MMAC) in Liege (1980), the Museum of Modern Art within the Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels (1984), the Provinciaal Museum voor Moderne Kunst (PMMK, Museum for Modern Art of the Province of West-Flanders) in Ostend (1984), and the Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerp (MuHKA, Museum for Contemporary Art, 1987).[39] More opportunities to exhibit contemporary art were provided by the aforementioned museums, as well as in a number of newly established local art centers. Furthermore, in the late 1980s, the representation of Belgian artists, galleries, and exhibitions abroad began to rise.[40] Cultural policy had become more resolute in its approach to supporting the development and presentation of Flemish contemporary art in particular.[41] All of these events cannot be understood as separate from the restructuring of Belgian state that began in 1970 but did not take effect until 1980.[42] The federalization process had major consequences for the production and presentation of contemporary art in Flanders in the decade to follow.[43] While the establishment of an official cultural identity of Flanders meant an increase in resources to the artistic field, it also meant the endorsement of a particular kind of art and discourse (and several key figures related to its promotion).[44] This resulted

[34] While difficult to prove, Belgium is said to have one of the highest number of collectors per capita in the world, with many residing in Flanders. Major collections of modern and contemporary art are held, for example, by Mimi Dusselier, André Gordts, Anton and Annick Herbert, Filiep Libeert, Bernard Soens, Mark Vanmoerkerke, and Axel Vervoordt, among many others.

[35] The Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst in Ghent was permitted to move into the premises of the Museum voor Schone Kunsten only after nearly two decades of lobbying by the Vereniging voor het Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst (Association for the Museum of Contemporary Art), and it would be another 24 years before it would be granted its own autonomous building as the Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (SMAK).

[36] Established in 1970, the ICC was the first institute for contemporary art in Belgium.

[37] Florent Minne, "The Explosion of a Resolute and Multi-faceted Artistic Scene in Flanders", in: *Jan Hoet, Narcisse Tordoir, 43rd Venice Biennale*, 1988 (26 June - 25 Sept 1988), Venice: 8; Bart Cassiman, "Comments on the Exhibition", in: *Initiatief 86* (vol. 1), Ghent: v.z.w. Initiatief 85, 1986: 16. While a few post-war artists gained international reputations in the 1970s and early 1980s, such as Panamarenko and Marcel Broodthaers, Belgian artists were largely unknown beyond the local scene.

[38] A lack of international attention for Belgian art is evidenced by its absence in major events, such as Documenta (especially noted in 1982 – when only Broodthaers, already then-deceased, was shown). The summer of 1986 in Ghent is often referred to as a breakthrough moment for art in Belgium. Authors like Leen De Backer, Ludo Bekkers, Lieven van den Abeele, Bart Cassiman, Jan Hoet, and Bart De Baere (among others) attribute the effect to the events of *Initiatief 86* and *Chambres d'amis*. Still, by Documenta VIII in 1987, in the midst of the so-called explosion of the Flanders scene, only two Belgian artists were included. Further, De Baere notes that by 1995, it "all had run out of steam", see Bart De Baere, "The Artefactum years", in: *Collectie XXVI: De Artefactum Jaren*, Flor Bex and Jan De Vree (eds), Antwerp: MuHKA, 2010: 6.

[39] Prior to 1984, the Provinciaal Museum voor Moderne Kunst (PMMK) was temporarily based in Bruges and Ypres, but would later move to Ostend.

[40] Lieven van den Abeele, "Kunst. Handleiding bij het leven", in: *Kunst in België na 1975*, Flor Bex (ed.) Antwerp: Mercatorfonds, 2011: 87.

[41] The cultural minister Patrick Dewael even nominated Karel Geirlandt (the founding chairman of the Vereniging voor het Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst) as an advisor.

[42] While the foundations for a federal state were laid in 1970, it was not until 1980 that Flanders received its own legislative and executive authority. At that time, separate parliaments and governments were put into place in Flanders and in Wallonia. Flanders, however, would not become a fully-fledged federal state until 1993.

[43] The first Flemish government took office on January 21, 1982.

[44] *Initiatief d'amis* discussed in Chapter 2 makes a statement about this development.

in the embrace of certain artists and the neglect of others, and further motivated artists to self-organize.[45]

It is against this backdrop, in two very different cultural contexts, that this dissertation seeks to explore how artists responded to the shifting conditions for the production and presentation of contemporary art that can be observed in the late 1980s. As will be shown, breaking art out of the systems that bestow value upon it proved increasingly untenable, but taking an ideological standpoint within its institutions felt disingenuous. Both roads seemed to eventually lead to the same destination. As such, in 1985 where this dissertation picks up, the artists' initiative that Aorta exemplified was less compelling as a strategy to lay claim to the art of exhibiting. But that did not mean that artists had given up on the attempt to carve out a space for their own aesthetic autonomy, nor did the possibilities for artist-driven exhibitions cease to be of interest. Different strategies were devised to assert control over the mediation of art that reflect the social, political, and technological conditions in which the artists were living. These will form the subject of the study to follow.

Goal of Dissertation & Approach

This dissertation seeks to analyze and compare artistic strategies, emblematic of their time, which aimed to take control over the specific conditions that shape the appearance and reception of art in Flanders and the Netherlands – commonly referred to as the Low Countries. The objective is to reach a clearer understanding of the implications of these strategies, and their capacity to exert sovereignty. Following upon the work of pioneering artists from decades prior (who would, around this time, be associated with the term 'institutional critique'), by the 1980s artists were cognizant of the mechanisms by which art is framed, reproduced, and distributed.[46] Given the significant influence of these mechanisms, artists were induced to engage with them directly.[47] In so doing, they could navigate the various channels through which art is transmitted, and lay bare the motivations and implications of art's recuperation by an increasingly complex network of agents.[48] While the 1980s did not mark the first generation of artists to engage with procedures that may strike the reader as fundamentally 'curatorial', such activities in artistic practice increased in prevalence at this time.[49] The setting, design, and

[45] Wouter Derijck puts forward Club Moral and Kleenex as key examples. Wouter Derijck, "Kunstzinnige militanten van de punk. Grensoverschrijding in de Belgische beeldende kunst van de jaren tachtig", Licentiaat in de Geschiedenis scriptie, Faculteit Letteren en Wijsbegeerte, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 2003-2004.

[46] The term 'institutional critique' was first used in reference to politicized practices of the 1960s and 1970s by Mel Ramsden (with the collective Art & Language) in his essay, "On Practice", *The Fox,* no. 1, 1975: 66-83. But it would not be employed as a label to refer to the work of artists like Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, and Hans Haacke until a decade later, in an essay by Andrea Fraser titled "In: and Out of Place", (originally published in *Art in America*, 73:6, June 1985: 122-129). From that moment forward (even at times despite explicit disavowal), artists have been linked with the 'movement'. For more on the history of institutional critique, see: Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds), *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009: 8.

[47] Familiarity with the writings of post-structuralist philosophers, who had considerable influence in Belgium and the Netherlands, can also be seen as a reason for considering the structures that shape exhibitions. Authors like Jean Baudrillard, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Jürgen Habermas were widely read, quoted by artists (especially in the case of Baudrillard), and discussed in symposia.

[48] 'Recuperation' is used here in the sense employed by Hal Foster in his argument against the negative effects of 'pluralism', which he frames as the end of analytical quotation and cogent criticism. He defines recuperation as the act in which "the marginal [is] absorbed, the heterogeneous rendered homogeneous". It enables a situation in which art is "subject to this conventionality of the critical and may act in its name precisely when it least intends to." Hal Foster, *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*, Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1985: 26.

[49] While Paul O'Neill emphasizes the proliferation of curating as a medium of artistic practice in the 1990s, he points to authors such as John Miller and Jim Drobnick who have brought attention to the prevalence of curatorial engagement in artistic practices of the 1980s. Miller notes that this convergence had been "building since the 1980s through work linked to later forms of institutional critique in the U.S., as orchestrated by artists such as Julie Ault, Judith Barry, Louise Lawler, Group Material, and Fred Wilson." Meanwhile Drobnick notes that "any potential lineage of unconventional curatorial strategies (operating counter to museum conventions and historical exhibition paradigms) is often traced back to conceptual art of the 1960s but frequently omits the period of engaged curatorial practice that took place between the late 1960s and 1990s, in particular the developments within artistic practice that used curating as a medium during the 1980s." See Paul O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s*), Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012: 105-106.

organization of the exhibition of an artist's work; the commissioning or direct authorship of discourse about the work; and the determination of the (technological) format and method by which the work is to be distributed (and remediated) are all undertakings with which artists of this time were intricately involved.

As is suggested by Giele's contradictory position towards white cube design, artists who were critical of the operations of established institutions and sought alternative channels to reach a public, were not necessarily antagonistic towards the museum. In line with Andrew McClellan's contention that the museum is "little more than a rhetorical enemy of the avant-garde", I will argue that the situation was not black and white. McClellan, who has written extensively on art's public institutions, points to the potential of future research into "the productive tension between institutional resistance and collaboration within the avant-garde tradition", a tension that comes to the fore within each of the case studies to be discussed here.[50] As with works of the 1960s and 1970s that came to be associated with institutional critique, strategies of demystification and defiance towards art's institutions in the 1980s were fundamentally dialectical. As Alexander Alberro argues, "they dialectically negated that which was the vehicle of their voice, and yet held on to it at the same time."[51] Rather than frame artists and institutions as strictly antithetical, I will explore the relationship that develops between them, with artists working within, and beyond – in the shadow of the museum. I will consider how this relationship plays out in a cyclical manner in which the museum recuperates once subversive artistic practices. This, in turn, stimulates renewed resistance on behalf of artists, resulting in new aesthetic and ameliorative strategies. The institution can thus be seen as both the authority that offers a seal of approval – elevating critical practice – and as a wall to kick off against to propel oneself as a swimmer does across a pool, to use a metaphor favored by Rosalind Krauss.[52]

As such, this dissertation asserts that critical practice in Flanders and the Netherlands did not cease to exist in the 1980s, but shifted in format and approach from that exercised in earlier decades. While artists of earlier generations placed confidence in the potential of interventions made in public art institutions to have residual effects on society at large, by the 1980s such gestures of negation were less celebrated for their potential to excite social emancipation. Instead, artists aware of the possibility for art to work in service of the very systems it intends to critique, approached an art museum that was increasingly open to corporate sponsorship and populist entertainment. The question that emerges is how artists honed strategies to remain critical of these developments while contending with this loss of confidence in reshaping art's institutions as an idealized public sphere.[53] To gather insight into this matter, the exhibition – as the medium through which artworks are brought into contact with a public – is of vital interest. In this dissertation, therefore, key exhibitions are explored which have not thus far

[50] Andrew McClellan, "Museum Studies Now", *Art History*, Association of Art Historians, vol. 30, issue 4, Sept 2007: 567.
[51] Alexander Alberro, "Institutions, Critique and Institutional Critique", in: *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds), Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009: 4.
[52] Rosalind E. Krauss, *Under Blue Cup*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011: 25. Krauss uses the metaphor of the swimming pool to describe artists working with 'old' media in the midst of a post-medium condition: "The inventors of technical supports as a new form of recursivity are challenging the post-medium insistence about the end of the space specific to art's autonomy, what conceptual art dismissed as the white cube; instead they rely on the resistance of its walls to penetration, the way the sides of a pool provide the swimmer with a kicking post against which to propel himself in a new direction."
[53] This understanding of 'public sphere' draws from Hito Steyerl's essay "The Institution of Critique" (2006). She describes a transition that occurs between the first and second waves of institutional critique in conceptions of the art institution as a potential public sphere. She writes: "the claims that the first wave of institutional critique voiced were of course founded in contemporary theories of the public sphere, and based on an interpretation of the cultural institution as a potential public sphere." Yet by the second wave of institutional critique, in the late 1980s or early 1990s, "the claim that the cultural institution ought to be a public sphere was no longer unchallenged. The bourgeoisie had sort of decided that in their view a cultural institution was primarily an economic one and as such had to be subjected to the laws of the market. The belief that cultural institutions ought to provide a representative public sphere broke down with Fordism". Hito Steyerl, "The Institution of Critique" (2006) in: *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*, Gerald Raunig, Gene Ray (eds), London: MayFly Books, 2009: 14-15. Also relevant to this conception is Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy", in: *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Craig Calhoun (ed.), Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992: 109-142.

been recognized for the critical capacity of the artistic strategies employed. These exhibitions are emblematic of larger institutional and contextual conditions of a period that has profoundly impacted the working conditions of present-day artists, and created the art institutions we know today. Furthermore, by offering an in-depth account of the public appearance of contemporary art and the role played by artists in the production of exhibitions, this research gives an important contribution to the art history of both Flanders and the Netherlands.

Research Questions & Rationale

To achieve these aims, this dissertation explores the 'productive tension' alluded to by McClellan, as pertains to the particular moment of the late 1980s in Flanders and the Netherlands. The following questions have been posed in the course of this research: 1) What are the mediums and presentation formats most prevalent in exhibitions at this time? 2) How were artworks framed and mediated by their display? 3) Which agents have shaped the realization of particular, location-specific exhibitions? 4) How do the socio-political realities of the time influence the decisions made regarding what to show, and how to show it? 5) Is it possible to create critical distance from within the institution of art, and if so, how? 6) Which strategies have artists used to take control over the conditions of display, or to reflect upon the agency of secondary modes of production (otherwise referred to as mediation)? 7) On what level did these strategies result in a conflict between institutions and artists, both seeking to gain agency over the critical power of art's display? 8) And finally, what evidence is there to support my contention that new strategies to take control over the conditions of display are spurred forth by this conflict between institution and artist, resulting in new articulations of critique and forms of presentation?

As has already been made clear, the preoccupation of artists with conditions of display did not begin in the 1980s, nor did this drive to develop strategies to escape the limitations of art's institutionalization. Both undercurrents have long trajectories through the history of avant-garde practice, which can be traced in myriad ways.[54] Where this dissertation seeks to add to extant discourse is in re-evaluating a period of artistic practice in a geographic region which has thus far been largely discounted for its apolitical, or critically disengaged nature.[55] With this study I seek to evaluate such practices in the specific context of the time and place in which they emerged; a time which was pivotal in shaping the art institution we encounter at present. I will argue that under the specific conditions in which these practices emerged in Flanders and the Netherlands – conditions which had already changed quite substantially from the 1960s and 1970s – the potential routes artists could take to critique or subvert market forces and conformist institutions were limited. Many ideologically vulnerable positions

[54] For example: Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984; Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986; T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999; John Roberts, "Art and its Negations", *Third Text*, 24:3, 2010: 289-303.
[55] With regard to the art of Western Europe in the 1980s, see: Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting", *October*, vol. 16, spring 1981: 39-68; Michael Gibbs, "De kunst van het vergeten, het verloren idealisme van de jaren zestig", *kunst & museumjournaal*, vol. 3, no. 6, 1992: 12-17; and Sven Lütticken, "De lange jaren tachtig: Tussen 'no future' en het einde van de geschiedenis", *Metropolis M,* no. 3, June/July 2016: 80; on the Dutch context in particular, see: Jeske de Bekker and Marisa Melchers, "Over postmodernisme en de beeldende kunst", in: *Vrij spel: Nederlandse Kunst 1970-1990*, Willemijn Stokvis and Kitty Zijlmans (eds), Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1993: 28-33; and Sven Lütticken, "Talking Back and Looking Ahead: Talking Back to the Media and Genealogies of Critical Media Art", in: *A Critical History of Media Art in the Netherlands: Platforms, Policies, Technologies*, Sanneke Huisman and Marga van Mechelen (eds), Prinsenbeek: Uitgeverij Jap Sam Books, 2019: 342-356; this characterization of art (often framed as a strength) can also be found throughout the art criticism included in Peter de Ruiter, *De terugkeer van het schilderen. Kunstkritische opvattingen over een ijzersterk medium 1975-1989* (Kunstkritiek in Nederland 1885-2015, vol. 1), Jonneke Jobse (ed.), Rotterdam: nai010, 2014.

of those earlier decades were viewed as suspect by artists working in the 1980s, and avenues that had once seemed promising ceased to offer the same potential for impact.[56]

In particular, by the late 1980s, the idealism rooted in self-organized initiatives that could still be found in the early years of the decade, had begun to wane.[57] As will become clear in the discussion of Aorta and De Appel's institutionalization in Chapter 1, by the late 1980s it was difficult to see the 'alternative circuit' in Flanders or the Netherlands as genuinely disconnected from the museum or the profanities of the market. Making a related observation about the alternative circuit in New York in the 1980s, art historian Sandy Nairne explains that "the 'alternate space' had become another image to be reworked and put into inverted commas, [which] demonstrated both the pervasiveness of the idea [of an alternative circuit] and the power of the market to adopt and absorb it."[58] Speaking in broader terms, art critic and art historian Hal Foster pointed out in 1985 that "alternative spaces seem nearly the norm", partly as a result of the fact that the modern museum of art had "largely passed the function of accreditation on to alternative spaces – the very function *against* which these spaces were established."[59]

While the situations of both Flanders and the Netherlands were notably different from New York – particularly on the question of governmental subsidy and the degree of investment of the art market – there are clear parallels to be drawn. Spaces in each location began to be embraced by established institutions, respected as 'branches' for promising new talent while at the same time undergoing a process of professionalization (often incentivized by the terms of governmental subsidies). It is in light of these ambiguous circumstances that this dissertation endeavors to look closer at the interplay between artists and institutions, holding up exhibitions of the time to the research questions above.

Methodology

Exhibitions as Case Studies

Exhibitions have been chosen as the object of study for their relevance to the time period and the possibilities they offer to discuss works of art in the context of their presentation. By the 1980s the 'art of exhibiting' had become a driving force behind art's presentation, but also its production.[60] Exhibitions became ubiquitous as vehicles for the promotion of ideas, for positing concepts, and shaping reception. While the agency of the curator – the exhibition maker – did not only begin to receive notice in the

[56] Artists' cooperation, and the creation of projects built upon their own ideas, without concerns for profits or individual progress, was a rebuke of a system increasingly attuned to values of capitalism. Working outside its pressures implies a 'revolt' against it. On the other hand, the cost-effective, do-it-yourself (and for yourself) approach allowed for such efforts to integrate exceedingly well with the neoliberal policies of the shrinking welfare state. In the Netherlands in the 1980s these were spearheaded by three cabinets led by Ruud Lubbers (between 1982 and 1994), which sought to further reduce reliance on governmental assistance. For more on the policies of Lubbers' three cabinets see: Pieter Gerrit Kroeger and Jaap Stam, *De rogge staat er dun bij. Macht en verval van het CDA 1974-1998*, Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Balans, 1998.

[57] In the Netherlands, this should also be understood in relation to shifts in cultural policy; as 'quality' became an increasingly significant criterium for funding, and the progressive dismantling of the BKR led to a total transformation of Dutch cultural policy in 1986, artists found themselves forced to shift how they approached their livelihood.

[58] Sandy Nairne, "The Institutionalization of Dissent", in: *Thinking about Exhibitions*, Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, Sandy Nairne (eds), London: Routledge, 1996: 284.

[59] Hal Foster, *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*, Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1985: 25.

[60] See, for instance, Evelyn Beer and Riet de Leeuw, *L'Exposition imaginaire: The art of exhibiting in the eighties*, The Hague: SDU Uitgeverij, 1989; Sandra Spijkerman, "De tentoonstellingsmaker in de hoofdrol?" in: *Vrij spel: Nederlandse Kunst 1970-1990*, Willemijn Stokvis and Kitty Zijlmans (eds), Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1993: 261-288; Marlene Dumas and Roos Theuws, "The art of exhibiting", *Metropolis M*, no. 3, 1990: 30-33, and the follow-up series by Leontine Coelewij, Dominic van den Boogerd, and Henriëtte Heezen, "The art of exhibiting: the exhibition as art", *Metropolis M*, vol. 1, 1991: 30-39; or Bernd Klüser, "Avant-propos. Le marché de l'art et la culture d'exposition durant les années 1980", in: *L'art de l'exposition: Une documentation sur trente expositions exemplaires du XXe siècle,* Bernd Klüser and Katharina Hegewisch (eds), Paris: Le Regard, 1998: 11-14.

1980s, what did change was the level of fanfare bestowed upon exhibitions.[61] More a production than an assembly of self-contained artworks, the exhibition as an independent format was subject to intense criticism (or celebration). Exhibitions had become an art of their own – as blockbusters increasingly seen for their potential to draw an ever-larger audience, serving as a motor for the cultural industry. Publicity and promotion across all forms of mass media were part and parcel of this development, as was the re-mythologizing of the role of the curator.[62] As a result, artists were impelled to become more involved in the shaping of exhibitions, and in exposing the agendas behind their construction. The strategies employed by artists in both Flanders and the Netherlands to exert control over the conditions that shape the appearance and reception of art in the 1980s can therefore be observed in the period's exhibitions. The manner in which exhibitions not only frame works of art, but also mediate between art and the public, make them a productive lens through which to analyze such strategies.

In the first phase of this study, preliminary research into the history of exhibitions in archives and libraries in both countries was endeavored. This addressed the first two research questions of this study, which look at the mediums and presentation formats most prevalent in exhibitions of this time, as well as the prevailing forms of mediation that framed artworks within them. With these findings in mind, key exhibitions were chosen as case studies: the exhibitions within an exhibition of Aorta on one hand, and De Appel on the other, both installed in the midst of *As Far as Amsterdam Goes…* (1985, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam); the exhibitions that developed in conjunction with, or as a response to *Initiatief 86* (1986, throughout the city of Ghent); the multifaceted events of *Talking Back to the Media* (1985, throughout the city and media outlets of Amsterdam), and *Kunst voor Televisie* (1987, VPRO/Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam/Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles); Gerald Van Der Kaap's *Hover Hover* (1991, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam) and Fortuyn/O'Brien's MARBLE*PUBLIC* (1991, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam), two exhibitions that took place in the same year at the same institution that show intriguing commonalities.[63] This selection was based on the capacity of each exhibition to demonstrate the complex interplay between artists seeking aesthetic autonomy, and the institutional body responsible for commissioning the exhibition. The exhibitions chosen are symptomatic of the challenges facing artists working in a variety of methods, with different mediums, and different conceptual motivations, yet who were nonetheless confronted with comparable institutional conditions. This allowed for a comparative study, with productive points of convergence and divergence.

Once case studies were selected, in-depth research into each exhibition was undertaken. This involved diving into the specific circumstances in which they were produced and received through an examination of archival materials.[64] The archives consulted included correspondence between curatorial staff, artists, gallerists, and collectors, exhibition checklists and floorplans, financial documentation, funding applications, and installation photography. Literature that chronicles each exhibition was also crucial, including exhibition catalogues, reviews from local, national, and international newspapers, and criticism from art journals such as (*Kunst &) Museumjournaal*, *De Witte Raaf*, *Kunst Nu*, and *Metropolis M*, *Artforum, Flash Art International*, *Frieze*, and *October*. Additional archival material and literature on the activities of artists whose works were featured in the exhibitions of focus was also essential in order to have a clear sense of artists' body of work leading up to and following the show. This was important to understand whether the works featured in the exhibition were a detour from practice as usual,

[61] We need only think of Daniel Buren's famous critique of Harald Szeemann's Documenta V, with his *Exhibition of an Exhibition, A work in 7 pieces, Work in Situ* in 1972. Daniel Buren, "Exposition d'une exposition/Ausstellung einer Ausstellung", in: d5 exhibition catalogue, Kassel: documenta GmbH/C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 1972: 17-29. See as well: Beatrice von Bismarck, "'The Master of the Works': Daniel Buren's Contribution to documenta 5 in Kassel, 1972", *OnCurating*, vol. 33, June 2017: 54-60.

[62] Paul O'Neill stresses this re-mythologizing of the curator in: Paul O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s*), Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012: 28.

[63] For a full list of all exhibitions that were considered for study see **Appendix B**.

[64] For a list of archives and libraries referenced and interviews conducted see the bibliography.

further informing the exhibition analysis. Whenever possible, interviews were conducted with artists whose works are discussed and curators involved in the production of exhibitions. These interviews allowed for elucidation of contradictory accounts in literary sources, and offered insight into the intentionality of those who played a part in the fruition of case studies.[65]

The agents responsible for shaping these historically and location-specific exhibitions were uncovered in the course of this research. These agents reveal much about the power structures inherent in the presentation of art.[66] The socio-political factors that were involved in its realization were also made clearer in the process, which further provided insight into the factors that motivated certain decisions to be made regarding what to show, and how to show it. Furthermore, through a historical reconstruction of each case study – made possible through archival materials and interviews – I was able to get a deeper sense of the strategies that artists used to mediate their own works, to take control over the conditions of display, or to deconstruct the agency of mediation more generally.

In approaching artistic practice and the hosting institution as necessarily intertwined and inherently conflicted, choices made in realizing exhibitions have been analyzed as the result of a veritable struggle for agency – or as will be argued, as potential forms of critique not previously characterized as such. This has been made possible through a comparative study, looking to exhibitions that involve the situation in which artists take several different positions in relation to the mediation of their work. It has brought the dialectic between artists and institutional mediators to the fore and permitted the remaining research questions to be addressed, which are concerned with the generative capacity of a conflict between institutions and artists, both seeking to gain agency over the critical power of art's display. The medium-specific characteristics of the works covered in this dissertation was likewise integral to their analysis; but while these vary from chapter to chapter, mediation has been a constant subject of focus throughout.

The selected cases are not exhibitions associated with a canonical discourse, and while they all received attention from critics at the time of their public appearance, little has been written about them in the past three decades.[67] I contend that these exhibitions, like many others that appeared in the 1980s, call for fresh analysis. However, it has not been my intention to contribute to a ranking of importance, which would place one over another. Each exhibition, when studied in its historical context has the potential to offer productive insights. Therefore, in this dissertation I have endeavored to complicate what is at current an overly simplistic understanding of art in the late 1980s, and I suggest that artistic practices of this time have been underappreciated for their critical engagement with the institutions and conditions in which their work was realized.

Time Period: The Late 1980s (1985-1991)

In recent years, given the clarity of historical distance, art of the 1980s has begun to receive due critical attention and reappraisal – in the Low Countries and beyond.[68] As Sven Lütticken has pointed out, it has

[65] The unfortunate passing of Jan Hoet just prior to the beginning of this research, and of curator Dorine Mignot, filmmaker Jef Cornelis, and artists Jan Vercruysse, Panamarenko, and John Baldessari over the course of research, further underscores the urgency of addressing this moment in history with the advantage of first-hand accounts.

[66] De Leeuw describes exhibitions "as a hub, as a center where the protagonists meet each other and choose their positions." Riet de Leeuw, "Inleiding", in: *De Kunst van het tentoonstellen: De presentatie van beeldende kunst in Nederland van 1800 tot heden*, Riet de Leeuw (ed.), Den Haag: Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst/ Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1991: 21, 24.

[67] While *Chambres d'amis* (1986) can be considered canonical in its prominence in the history of exhibitions in Belgium, this study is not as interested in *Chambres d'amis* as in the effect of *Chambres d'amis* on the other exhibitions that took place in Ghent at the same time, often overshadowed by Jan Hoet's more celebrated project.

[68] In addition to a wealth of scholarly texts and popular reflections recently published on the art of the 1980s, exhibitions over the last decade (or so) have included: *The 80s: A Topology*, Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, Porto (cur. Ulrich Loock, 2006-2007); *This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (cur. Helen Molesworth, Barbara Lee, 11 Feb-3 June 2012);

become widespread as of late to think about the 1980s as "the real historical ground zero of the contemporary condition."[69] Given that art historians have struggled to categorize artistic practice in this decade, falling upon tropes, such as 'pluralism', or 'eclecticism' to justify the diversity of forms, themes, and references explored by artists, there remains much work to be done in learning from the specific circumstances in which art was produced, exhibited, and received in this time.[70] The focus of this dissertation is limited to a particular time period (the 'late 1980s') within this long decade.[71] In the late 1980s a shift can be observed in the strategic approach of artists to the conditions of display. Artists sought to find maximum autonomy working inside and outside art's institution while they went about exploring new formats and finding new means of (re)presentation.[72] This is related to numerous factors. While artists' initiatives were undergoing a process of institutionalization, museums were undergoing a crisis of identity, looking to popularize programs and increase corporate sponsorship.[73] The tentative position of the contemporary art museum, as an institution that both commissions and collects art, was subjected to growing political pressure and societal demand for greater public accessibility and participation. At the same time, private and corporate sponsorship begins to play a role in these exhibitions, contradicting an often-heard falsehood that such influence is a more recent development. Shifts in political leanings and neoliberal policy making had already been at work to encourage institutions of art in the Netherlands and Flanders – among other Western European countries – to look upon corporate and private sponsorship as preferable to state support. Reductions to state welfare funding can only be seen to have accelerated since.

This window of time allows us to see into a period that occurred between the early part of the decade and the present. Strategies can be observed in which artists push against institutions while engaging with them, seeking to carve out a space within, or in response to the activities of museums. There is a critical awareness of the (perceived) failure of avant-garde projects with its embrace by the modern art museum, and a suspicion towards ideological projects that would frame the museum as a public sphere. Yet there is nonetheless a lingering belief in the potential of using the museum as a space to perform critique, albeit it an often-ambiguous one. A shift can be observed in the 1990s, with an upturn in socially-engaged and relational works that reflect less on the conditions of display. The demystification of production methods as the shared aim of artist and curator, together with a

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Stop Making Sense: Nederlandse Schilderkunst uit de jaren '80, Dordrechts Museum, Dordrecht (2012-2013); *Minimal Resistance. Between Late Modernism and Globalisation: Artistic Practices During the 80s and 90s*, Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid (16 Oct 2013- 5 January 2014); *Take It or Leave It: Institution, Image, Ideology*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, (cur. Anne Ellegood and Johanna Burton, 9 Feb-18 May 2014); *The 1980s. Today's Beginnings?* Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (cur. Nick Aikens and Diana Franssen, 16 April-25 Sept 2016); *De Jaren 80 Doemdenkers en positivo's*, Het Noordbrabants Museum, Den Bosch (3 June to 15 Oct 2017); *The Eighties – A Decade of Extremes*, MuHKA, Antwerp (cur. Leen De Backer, 17 June-18 Sept. 2016); *New Spaces, New Images. The 1980s through the Prism of Events, Exhibitions and Discourses*, Moderna Galerija, Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana Slovenia (cur. Asta Vrečko and Martina Malešič, 14 Oct 2016-1 Jan 2017). This is not an exhaustive list, but it gives a sense of the widespread return of the 1980s as a subject of interest for institutions of art in Europe and the United States in the years surrounding the writing of this dissertation.

[69] Sven Lütticken, "De lange jaren tachtig: Tussen 'no future' en het einde van de geschiedenis", *Metropolis M,* no. 3, June/July 2016: 80. L'internationale, a confederation of European museums working in collaboration with universities and other partners, has devoted a number of exhibitions to re-examining the 1980s as a turning point, among them: *How Did We Get Here*, SALT, Istanbul (3 Sept-29 Nov 2015), *The 1980s. Today's Beginnings?* Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (16 April- 25 Sept 2016) and a seminar series entitled, *1980s - The Multiple Origins of Contemporary Art in Europe Today*, University College Ghent, KASK School of Arts, Ghent (26 Jan-29 Apr. 2016).

[70] John Perrault, et al. "Pluralism in Art and in Art Criticism", *Art Journal*, vol. 40, no. 1/2, 1980: 377–379. On the disadvantages of pluralism for critical appraisal see also: Hal Foster, *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*, Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1985. The 1990s have been associated with the reign of eclecticism. See, for example: Helen Molesworth, "House Work and Art Work", *October*, vol. 92, spring 2000: 71.

[71] While the focus of this dissertation is the 'late 1980s', the years between 1985 and 1991, I use the 'long 1980s' to indicate a pivotal decade, the influence of which extends prior to 1980 and beyond 1991. Sven Lütticken, in "De lange jaren tachtig: Tussen 'no future' en het einde van de geschiedenis" uses 1977, "the year the emancipatory and revolutionary wave of '1968' crashed and the 1980s began" as the starting point of the long 1980s and the triumph of a new world order led by America on the other (with the dissolution of the Soviet Union dated to 1991). This dissertation also follows along these lines. The approach of *The Long 1980s: Constellations of Art, Politics and Identities* (Nick Aikens, et al. (eds), Amsterdam: Valiz, 2018) is less precise, using the term to refer to the period between 1975-1995.

[72] Angela Bartholomew, *Interview with Saskia Bos*, Amsterdam, 31 October 2017.

[73] This institutionalization is further discussed in Chapter 1. See also: Lilian Boes and Yve De Vries, "Kunstenaarsinitiatieven", in *Vrij Spel: Nederlandse Kunst 1970-1990*, Willemijn Stokvis and Kitty Zijlmans (eds), Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1993: 223-225.

concerted interest in social engagement can be traced in Flanders at least as far back as Yves Aupetitallot, Iwona Blazwick and Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's exhibition at the MuHKA, *On taking a normal situation and retranslating it into overlapping and multiple readings of conditions past and present*, which took place in 1993 (as part of the larger events of Antwerp's year as the cultural capital of Europe). It is just as apparent in the same year in the Netherlands in Valerie Smith's edition of *Sonsbeek* in Arnhem.

As indicators of trends not only in art but in display methods, the editions of Documenta that fall just prior to the period of focus (Documenta 7, 1982) and just following (Documenta 9, 1992) are indicative of an evolution in thinking about the relationship of art to its context. These editions are even more poignant because they are directed by curatorial figures influential in the Netherlands (Rudi Fuchs) and Flanders (Jan Hoet). Fuchs' edition (Documenta 7) afforded most esteem to the beaux-arts: painting and sculpture.[74] Fuchs was resolute that art required protection from the everyday world and devised installations based upon dialogues he perceived between objects. It is this understanding of art to which Giele and the artists of Aorta rebelled against with *Beeldstroom*, a postmodern response to what felt at the time like a last breath for modernism. Ten years later, Hoet's edition (Documenta 9) extended well beyond the museum to engender art encounters throughout the city. While staunchly opposed to corporate sponsorship, Hoet popularized contemporary art as an affective experience, bringing art into places where it was unexpected, exploring the possibilities of interaction between art and site.[75]

When juxtaposed, these two editions reflect a clear shift in approach to the traditional setting of the museum. The commissioning institution in Hoet's edition comes to play a role as an instigator of activities beyond its walls. Naturally, this shift needs to be seen in connection with larger developments in artistic practice (which curatorial strategies imitate in due course), with installation art, site-sensitive and site-specific practice, and new (inter)media forms growing more prevalent over the course of the decade. Yet despite the disparity in approach, the strategies Fuchs and Hoet employed with Documenta embedded the work in a larger production, removing agency from individual works, and channeling much of the attention to the exhibition and its maker. Artists countered this loss of agency in different ways with varying degrees of success, as will be seen in each of the case studies discussed in this dissertation. By the time the following Documenta came to fruition in 1997, curatorial agency had taken a different form. Curated by Catherine David, Documenta 10 veered away from the idea of the artist as a heroic figure, let alone the curator as one.[76] A focus on the 'documentary' as form took precedence, taking steps towards a dismissal of the authorial figure (albeit a deception). Less antagonism between curator and artist was readily visible, and the battle over the conditions of art's display did not play out in the physical space of the exhibition as it had in the two earlier editions.

Geographic Focus: The Low Countries of Flanders & The Netherlands

To look into exhibitions in both Flanders and the Netherlands allows for comparisons to be made. There is a degree of continuity between both areas in terms of the network in which artists and institutional actors interact; certain figures reappear in both. They share a cultural past and a sense of importance for art and its presentation through exhibitions. There is a common language, which allows for

[74] Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Documenta 7: A Dictionary of Received Ideas", *October*, vol. 22, autumn 1982: 104-126; Douglas Crimp, "The Art of Exhibition", *October*, vol. 30, autumn 1984: 49-81; Nanda Janssen, "Een onderzoek naar de visie en receptie van Documenta 7, 8 en IX", Doctoraalscriptie, Universiteit Utrecht, 2000.

[75] Peter Schjeldahl, "The Documenta of the Dog", *Art in America* 80, no. 9, Sept. 1992: 90-97; David Batchelor, "Almost everything is available", *Frieze*, no. 6, Sept/Oct 1992: 5-38; Angela M. Bartholomew, "Installations Everywhere: Disorientation and Displacement in Jan Hoet's documenta IX (1992)", *OnCurating*, Nanne Buurman (ed.), vol. 33, June 2017: 144-150.

[76] Claire Bishop has observed this shift, though she argues that Documenta 9 was a late holdover of an already bygone era of the cult of the author. Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London: Verso, 2012: 194.

publications and discourse to easily be distributed on both sides, thus enabling cross-fertilization, and further contributing to a shared conception of the exhibition construct. Flanders and the Netherlands are, however, distinct in very significant ways with regard to forms of support for visual art. They differ in cultural policy, in the robustness of institutional (infra)structures, and in the nature of the relationship between art and (local) politics.[77] As noted earlier in this introduction, structural support was unheard of for artists in Flanders to the degree it was organized in the Netherlands, and institutions in which contemporary art could be seen were far and few between. As such, case studies in Flanders, where there was very little to speak of in terms of a historical legacy of institutional frameworks and support for contemporary artistic production, could be productively contrasted with case studies in the Netherlands.

Between 1985 and 1991 there is notable influence of private and commercial investment on developments in art in Flanders and the Netherlands, even in public institutions.[78] Additionally, considerable sway exerted by lone curatorial figures, such as Jan Hoet and Rudi Fuchs, is indicative of a re-mythologizing of the role of curator as author – a development that goes hand in hand with an increase in prominence of exhibitions.[79] Little has been written about these developments in relation to the strategies of artists to confront their effects, in part because of a tendency to make generalizations about the art of Flanders and the Netherlands as disengaged, regressive, and difficult to align with any particular strains or ideologies (again on account of pluralism). Nonetheless, on both sides of the border there were profound changes occurring in the approach to art's presentation, and artists were most definitely responding in insightful ways. It is therefore the contention of this dissertation that these assumptions of disengagement require revision.

The case studies discussed in this dissertation were chosen for the distinct manner in which the conditions of the exhibition, and the artistic strategies observed, relate to the research questions posed by this study. That is to say that these cases demonstrate the wide array of mediums embraced by artists at the time while also providing an image of diverse circumstances with which artists were confronted in dealing with the proposal presented by the exhibition maker, or instigating institution. Ultimately, this resulted in the selection of exhibitions that takes place in Ghent (*Chambres d'amis*, *Initiatief d'amis*, and *Antichambre* – all of which are connected in one way or another to *Initiatief 86*) and Amsterdam (the exhibitions within *As Far as Amsterdam Goes…* (1985), *Talking Back to the Media* (1985), *Kunst voor Televisie* (1987), *Hover Hover* (1991), and MARBLE*PUBLIC* (1991)). It is important to note, however, that despite taking place in Flanders or the Netherlands, most of the exhibitions analyzed include artists and organizers that hail from a range of places. Hence, while the discussion is centered on the circumstances of these exhibitions, rooted in specific cities, that the artists they featured and the administrators that made them possible are not strictly Flemish or Dutch (and that Flemish artists feature in Dutch exhibitions, and vice versa), has resulted in a more nuanced study of artistic strategies than would be possible with a focus on regional 'schools'. Guillaume Bijl and Jef Cornelis appear in exhibitions in the Netherlands as well as in Flanders, for example, while Barbara

[77] While the Belgian state faced sweeping reforms in moving towards federalization, with Flanders given legislative and executive authority on matters of cultural funding in 1980, the Netherlands was undertaking the dismantling of the welfare state. The starting points differ in each country as well: the ecology of the art field in Flanders in the 1970s contrasts dramatically with the Netherlands in the 1970s – particularly with regard to the lack of state-supported institutions for contemporary art in the former.

[78] Lilian Boes and Yve De Vries, "Kunstenaarsinitiatieven", in *Vrij Spel: Nederlandse Kunst 1970-1990*, Willemijn Stokvis and Kitty Zijlmans (eds), Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1993: 223-225. The art market is linked by Ludo Bekkers to the success of Belgian contemporary visual art. It privileged above all else the signature of the artist (rather than the quality of the work itself), and therefore demanded a constant stream of new and different artists. Ludo Bekkers, "De beeldende kunsten in Vlaanderen. Recente ontwikkelingen", *Ons Erfdeel*, vol. 33, 1990: 63-64.

[79] Hoet's network, the artists he showed, collected, and the gallerists and collectors involved exerted much influence over the Flemish art world and its art collection. However, there were other influential circles: those around the Joost Declercq Gallery, for example, which included Anton and Annick Herbert. For a discussion of networks in the Flemish artworld see: Pascal Gielen, *Kunst in netwerken: artistieke selecties in de hedendaagse dans en de beeldende kunst*, Tielt: Uitgeverij Lannoo, 2003.

Bloom, Daniel Buren, General Idea, Hans Haacke, Barbara Kruger, and Betrand Lavier – none of whom can be described as Flemish or Dutch – contributed works that were intricately involved with the specific context of the exhibitions in which they were featured. Likewise, curators such as Kathy Rae Huffman, Jean-Hubert Martin, and Kasper König played pivotal roles in the exhibitions discussed in this dissertation despite residing in nations outside the Low Countries.

Artists as Agents

The artists involved in each exhibition selected for study in this dissertation are essential agents in devising strategies for the presentation of their work. Too frequently exhibitions are discussed as the product of curatorial authorship, without noting the crucial role played by artists.[80] While the historical context and practical factors that shape exhibitions are important to their study, just as critical was the question of how the artists involved accounted for the conditions of this encounter.[81] To this end, research was undertaken into the artists involved to better contextualize their strategic choices. The influence artists have in the eventual exhibition can be evidenced in several ways, in the choices made in the realization of the works themselves, as well as in the selection of works to be put on view, the chosen method of presentation, and in the development of other (secondary) modes of production that shape reception, such as writing about the work. As this dissertation will show, there is abundant evidence to support the claim that in the 1980s, artists were attuned to the forces driving the production of exhibitions, and the influence they exert over art. The diverse responses to come out of such situations is revealing of the creative potential that can be generated by being confronted with limitations.

The exhibitions selected as case studies involve a number of different mediums, from painting and sculpture to installation, television, video, photography, and computer-generated images. More often than not they include a combination of mediums, with many artists engaging with more than one medium. In each case, how to approach the making of an artwork for exhibition, with the ideal medium and the particular site in mind, involved a degree of foresight regarding the conditions in which it would be viewed. At work in the post-medium condition, artists need not constrain themselves to singular mediums, but were instead free to seek out the ideal medium for the project at hand.[82] Therefore, the medium or mediums selected for these particular circumstances is a crucial focus within this analysis as it involves a degree of reflection on behalf of the artist.

Artists, naturally, must also contend with the institutional agents responsible for exhibitions, and this means that figures such as curators also play a prominent role in their realization. This influence extends beyond their appearance, design, and discursive framing, to determine which artists will receive opportunities and which will not. As can be gathered from the cases selected, in the 1980s, art institutions in the Low Countries were largely run by men, with male curators and artists disproportionately represented. A disbalance can easily be observed between the number of male and female artists featured in exhibitions to have taken place at every art institution in Belgium and the Netherlands, let alone in their collections. The omission of significant female artists continues to be problematic in the Netherlands, and is even more egregious in Flanders.[83] Efforts have been made in

[80] As Eva Fotiadi argues in her essay, "The canon of the author. On individual and shared authorship in exhibition curating", curatorial authorship is often exaggerated: "the image of the curator as a charismatic single-author is to some degree a construction." *Journal of Art Historiography*, issue 11, 2011: 2. Accessed through: arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/fotiadi.pdf.

[81] A breakdown of the artists that took part in the exhibition focused on in this study can be found in **Appendix C**.

[82] On the post-medium conditions, see: Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, New York: Thames & Hudson, Inc., 1999.

[83] This disbalance received press attention in the Netherlands in late 2019, following research conducted by *de Volkskrant* into the collections of 28 art museums. Three museums (Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, Museum Arnhem and the Fries Museum) have since installed a quota as

this dissertation, whenever possible, to emphasize important (and too often overlooked) contributions made by women to the exhibitions in question.

As a final point on the methodology, this research has not attempted to offer an exhaustive look at all possible strategies and exhibitions that could be considered valid in a study of the critical motivations of art in this time period. As such, there are many other cases that could have been selected. Here, the selection of case studies is justified in relation to the aforementioned factors, which were deemed of greater importance than equal geographic distribution. Above all else, the case studies themselves have driven the selection, as well as the elected theoretical framework.

Theoretical Framework & Key Terms

Now that the selection process for case studies, and the methods applied in their study have been clarified, what remains is a discussion of the theoretical framework that will be used to analyze the exhibitions at hand. To sufficiently address the research questions of this dissertation, a theoretical framework has been devised that draws from three lines of thought. Theories of institutional critique, subversivity, and mediation (as a secondary mode of production) have informed the analysis of each case study in the chapters to follow. Below, the theoretical lines that structure this study will be further explained in relation to their significance to the topic.

Reframing Institutional Critique

Institutional critique is most associated with the 1960s and 1970s, when as Evelyn Beer and Riet de Leeuw put it, "art laid deliberate claim to the (exhibition) space and used it for experiments".[84] From exposing the museum, and its white cube galleries, as an institutionally conditioned space that works within a specific cultural framework, artists like Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, and Michael Asher demystified the artifice of the museum in these decades. They drew attention to its classification systems and the registers through which it declared value, challenging the objectivity (and with it the authority) of the museum to distinguish works of art.[85] As such, these practices have been recognized for their interrogation of cardinal principles of modernism, such as authenticity and originality, an impulse that can also be seen across a broad range of practices in the 1980s. Rosalind Krauss' *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modern Myths*, published in 1986, is also testament to this enduring imperative to deconstruct conventional lines of thought and the institutions that further them. However, the form taken by artists seeking to critically engage with institutions of the 1980s notably differs from the more utopian perspectives of earlier projects associated with institutional critique. As Daniel Buren argued from the start, escape from the museum was impossible, but working within was also precarious given that critical gestures can be consumed and returned as

part of their presentation and collection policies to remedy this. See: Wieteke van Zeil, "Nederlandse musea hanteren quota voor aankoop werk vrouwelijke kunstenaars", *de Volkskrant*, 27 Dec 2019; Wieteke van Zeil, "Hoeveel oog hebben Nederlandse musea voor vrouwelijke makers?", *de Volkskrant*, 27 Dec 2019; and Wieteke van Zeil, "Gaan we nu eindelijk van vrouwelijke kunstenaars houden?", *de Volkskrant*, 27 Dec 2019. No such survey has been conducted into Belgian collections, though an overview of exhibitions from the major art platforms of the 1980s and 1990s, such as the International Cultural Center in Antwerp and the Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst in Ghent, shows an overwhelming majority of male artists.

[84] Evelyn Beer and Riet de Leeuw, *L'Exposition imaginaire: The art of exhibiting in the eighties*, The Hague: SDU Uitgeverij, 1989: 8.

[85] This can be seen quite literally in the work of Broodthaers, in his *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* (1968-1972), for instance, which incorporates objects typically associated with the infrastructure surrounding the exhibition into its classification system – the carrying crate is as much a part of the collection as a mask, a pipe, or a mirror.

controversial novelty (institutional critique for institutional gain).[86] Under such conditions, interventions like those that had taken place in the 1960s and 1970s could already be seen as lost to instrumentalization. For an artist to work with the museum of the 1980s – i.e. an exhibition machine – the mode of critique would need to change with each new context: targeting the status of the museum, its dispositive, its methods, and the mode of viewing it engendered.

Hans Haacke, an artist associated with institutional critique who continued to work within institutions throughout the 1980s and 1990s (and into the present), unravels, breaks down, or maps out the complex web of agendas involved in art's presentation. For Haacke, what was extrinsic to the work becomes the intrinsic content of the work itself – the conditions that led to its appearance come to form its aesthetic construction. Haacke's works contradict any supposition of the autonomy of art, tying art instead to the structures of power that shape all other social relations.[87] It goes without saying that the system of art's commissioning and appearance in the contemporary art museum is far more complex than a direct commission from patron to artist. Therefore, institutional critique seeks to reveal how institutions diffuse responsibility, and in doing so mystify the relations involved in art's presentation. Rather than carving out a new space for art, what the practices of artists like Haacke reveal is that critique is a continual process which seeks to lay bare the true identity of that space; Broodthaers called this the "essential structure of art, a process of reification".[88]

As such, institutional critique cannot remain an indicator of authentically critical practice without continuing to evolve with the conditions of the context. If we see it as a strain of artistic practice that is attentive to the social and cultural conditions that shape the production, presentation, and distribution of art, then a much more complex picture comes into focus, which allows diverse works to be discussed in relation to the contexts in which they have appeared. Institutional critique has, after all, already been conferred (at least) two generations (or three, if you start with Duchamp and Breton). These later practices resonate with the earlier aims of artists to question and demystify the processes of art's institutionalization, but also bear the stamp of their time. They reflect the changing identity of the art institution, with shifting perceptions of art's relationship to politics and representation, and an awareness of the potential of critique to be recuperated – to strengthen, rather than threaten, reigning power structures.

A lineage of institutional critique in the Low Countries can be traced from the 1970s through artists that were involved with the Art & Project gallery or the Actie Beroepsvereniging van Beeldende Kunstenaars (Actie B.B.K). These artists developed strategies that manifested in ways that were distinct from their American counterparts. But in the 1980s in Flanders, as in the Netherlands, institutional critique was without a defining discourse. There was no readymade context or unifying theory. Discussions on the significance of postmodernism were prevalent, but artists did not focus on related strategies of demystification, nor did they (even superficially) pair their strategies with post-structural theories (as artists had done in the United States or the United Kingdom, such as those associated with the Pictures Generation). However, it is the contention of this dissertation that institutional critique did not cease to exist in Flanders and the Netherlands at this time, but shifted in its approach and appearance, seeking an alternative form of critique that did not risk dogmatism.[89]

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[86] Daniel Buren, "The Function of the Museum" (1970), in: *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artist's Writings*, Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds), Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009: 102

[87] Fredric Jameson calls his strategy 'homeopathic'. Fredric Jameson, "Hans Haacke and the Cultural Logic of Postmodernism", in: *Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business*, Brian Wallis (ed.), Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986: 38-51.

[88] Broodthaers quoted from a 1974 interview, in: Deborah Schultz, *Marcel Broodthaers: Strategy and Dialogue*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2007: 221.

[89] There was a notable allergy to dogmatism in the period in question. The influence of post-structuralist philosophy (deconstructing grand narratives and binaries), the perceived failure of the avant-garde, and skepticism of Marxist ideology in the late Cold War years, all contributed to this sense.

It must also be considered that this is the same moment in which what is now referred to as institutional critique was coined as such.[90] This occurred in the mid-1980s in the United States, where it simultaneously led to the appearance of a second generation of institutional critique. Yet the practices of Buren, Haacke, Asher, and so on were shown often in the Low Countries at this time, where they were brought together and presented as celebrated forms of critical awareness. Critical practice to follow would most certainly have been challenged by this warm embrace. To critique an institution in the aftermath of institutional critique of the 1960s and 1970s, and in the midst of its birth as a canonical art historical movement, risked epigonism.

While American artists like Andrea Fraser, Renee Green, and Fred Wilson were being referred to as part of a 'second generation' of institutional critique, artists in Flanders and the Netherlands were responding to a different set of factors and different institutional contexts.[91] Their approaches were rooted in systems that differed with regards to funding and institutional agendas, but they were also inspired by different international sources and lineages. In this dissertation I therefore take the position that the strategies of artists observed in these case studies can be considered as potential forms of institutional critique, albeit an expanded notion. My aim is not to expand the definition of institutional critique to encompass any potentially critical gesture, thereby leading to the "neutralization of every possibility of really achieving critique" as warned against by Isabelle Graw.[92] Instead, I call for a reading of institutional critique as an articulation that does not always take on the attributes ascribed to it by historical discourse. This reading leaves open the possibility that given the precarious position of critique in the 1980s, practices that were seeking control over the conditions of display as a means to subvert institutional agency were, in fact, performing a critique of those institutions.

In this attempt to rescue institutional critique from its own canonization, this study is not alone. While not specific to the situation of the Low Countries, two projects have paved the way. *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice. Reinventing Institutional Critique*, edited by Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray (2009), brings together a collection of essays that challenge the assumption that institutional critique must stop at "the borders of the field of art", suggesting instead that "the strategies and specific competencies of art can also be deployed to spur on a general reflection on the problems of institutions, the predicaments of critique and the openings for new 'instituent practices'."[93] *Take It or Leave It: Institution, Image, Ideology*, an exhibition by Johanna Burton and Anne Ellegood at the Hammer Museum at the University of California, Los Angeles (2014) (accompanied by a catalogue of scholarly essays), also problematizes the strict canonization of institutional critique.[94] The exhibition included works that the curators found to be "actively and visibly engaged with considering the contours of the institution, which – as is made clear by the term's etymological links to concepts of disposition, arrangement, instruction, and education – both produces and is produced by social structures."[95] This

[90] Andrea Fraser, "In and Out of Place" (1985), in: *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artist's Writings*, Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds), Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009: 292-300.

[91] Institutional critique as a discourse has already been expanded to consider the power structures at large that determine art's public appearance, especially as concerns issues of identity politics and exclusion. Beyond the so-called second generation of institutional critique, opinions vary as to what practices should, or should not, be referred to within this discourse. Contemporary projects which are subversive in their aims (which draw connections with the Situationist International, for example), reject earlier notions of institutional critique which they view as capitulations to an institution that has merely incorporated more voices without shifting its underlying relations of power. These employ resistance tactics and exit strategies without merely enacting critique for the sake of its performance. See: Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds), *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artist's Writing,* Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009: 426-492.

[92] Isabelle Graw, "Jenseits der Institutionskritik", in: *Texte zur Kunst*, vol. 59, Sept. 2005: 43.

[93] For Raunig and Ray an instituent practice is one that "does not oppose the institution, but it does flee from institutionalization and structuralization." Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray (eds), "Preface", in: *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*, London: Mayfly, 2009: xvii.

[94] Johanna Burton and Anne Ellegood (eds), *Take It or Leave It: Institution, Image, Ideology*, Los Angeles, Hammer Museum, New York: DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2014.

[95] Johanna Burton and Anne Ellegood, "Introduction: Take It or Leave It", in: *Take It or Leave It: Institution, Image, Ideology,* Johanna Burton and Anne Ellegood (eds), Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, New York: DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2014: 11.

incorporated works associated with appropriation art and institutional critique – and a few works not previously linked with either label. The exhibition thus pushed beyond categorical conventions to access the fertile concepts underlying institutional critique. It is along a similar line that this dissertation aims to reframe institutional critique as a productive field of analysis, arguing that the distinction is contingent upon the circumstances in which the work comes into being.

In connection to the demand for new forms of institutional critique, as Andreas Huyssen has pointed out, it was in the 1980s that museums can be seen to have undergone a transformation.[96] 'Museummania', as he calls it, took the museum from a place of "elitist conversation" to one of "operatic exuberance".[97] As a mass medium, museums adopted new channels of address and modes of display; and in the throes of postmodernism, as its collections and procedures were appropriated by art and media alike, the very boundaries of the museum were blurred.[98] Diverse segments of cultural experience can be seen to have adopted a 'museal sensibility', or to have undergone 'musealization'.[99] Such a fundamental shift in the institution necessitates new forms of institutional critique, forms that tend to reflect, and emulate, these blurred boundaries in order to penetrate their subject. Likewise, it necessitates a new approach to interpreting critical strategies that build upon, but differ from those of generations prior.

Subversion & Subversivity

The term 'subversion' came into popular usage in the 1980s, especially in connection with the demystification of power structures associated with consumerism, and the latent messaging of advertising. As David Joselit explains: "In the 1980s a new critical desideratum arose: *to subvert*. Works of art – especially those engaged in various modes of appropriation – were seen to unveil the mechanisms of commercial culture, and in so doing to deliver a fatal blow to the society of the spectacle."[100] The very act of appropriation was, at this time, considered a subversive act for its upending of a society built on passive consumerism and the manufacture of desire.

However, as can be seen throughout the history of avant-garde practice, work that at first is subversive, or resistant to consumption, will frequently come to be embraced into the system, reframed and folded in as a product of value.[101] Much like practices of 'official' institutional critique, which could be framed as a movement in art among other historical developments, potentially subversive ideas are at risk of being embraced by the very system they critique. In the 1980s, with the ramping up of capitalism as a new world order, this development reached new heights. In the United States, as critics

[96] Andreas Huyssen, "Escape from Amnesia: The Museum as Mass Medium" in: *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, New York and London: Routledge, 1995: 13-35.
[97] Andreas Huyssen, "Escape from Amnesia: The Museum as Mass Medium" in: *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, New York and London: Routledge, 1995: 14.
[98] In Douglas Crimp's essay "On the Museum's Ruins" (*October*, vol. 13, summer, 1980: 41-57) he explains how modes of observation shifted between modernism and postmodernism. Postmodernism reflects upon the archive from which it draws its definition, through comparison and contrast. Contrary to modernism, in which taste and judgement were understood as 'self-evident', postmodernist thought questions presupposed knowledge to open the archive, combining and reordering objects in a manner considered 'non-sensical' or 'haphazard', but which allows for the constitution of new associations unhindered by pre-existent power structures. As is illustrated in the parable of the photographic Museum Without Walls, objects that are removed from their individual contexts – or reproduced – are provided new significance, given liberation through the embodiment of simple subtle distinctions.
[99] Huyssen identifies the "restoration of old urban centers", as much as the "boom of flea markets, retro fashions", and even "self-musealization per video recorder, memoir writing, and confessional literature" (among other examples) as evidence of a widespread cultural musealization (or museification) of Western Europe and the United States. Andreas Huyssen, "Escape from Amnesia: The Museum as Mass Medium" in: *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, New York and London: Routledge, 1995: 14.
[100] David Joselit, "An Allegory of Criticism", *October*, 103, winter 2003: 1.
[101] Guy Debord argues that to disempower subversive ideas "[t]he ruling ideology arranges the trivialization of subversive discoveries, and widely circulates them after sterilization." Guy Debord, "Report on the Construction of Situations", in: *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, Tom McDonough (ed.), Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002: 31.

like Hal Foster and David Joselit have noted, for a work of art to be referred to as 'subversive' became a platitude. As Foster explains:

> In modern art recuperation often occurred when the non- or anti-artistic was made aesthetic. Such recuperation is not now what it was for Duchamp, for the space of the aesthetic has changed (indeed, the very category is in doubt). Shock, scandal, estrangement: these are no longer tactics against conventional thought — they *are* conventional thought. As such, they need to be *re*thought. Only, *that* process too is in many ways conventional: as Barthes noted, such demystification is now the norm.[102]

Joselit evokes a similar sentiment about the institutionalization of the subversive explaining that in the 1980s "the locus of aesthetic value shifted from quality to criticality—from the 'good' to the "subversive."[103]

Amid an abundance of so-called subversive practices, it becomes clear that critique can easily be turned into a marketable commodity. The question thus becomes whether it is possible to avoid the situation in which the work, no matter its intentions, is easily converted into what Isabelle Graw has called "subversion for hire", where "criticism turns into spectacle".[104] By the late 1980s, artists would already have been aware of this tendency (along with the canonization of institutional critique) and apprehensive about the efficacy of subversive ideas mediated by art's institutions, which, much like "efficacious criticism", as Joselit puts it, "is short-lived, always vulnerable to the twin dangers of incorporation or irrelevance."[105]

This is not to say that authentic subversion and efficacious criticism did not exist in the late 1980s. Subversive artistic practices in countries facing political oppression are given due attention, for example, in the exhibition and catalogue, *Subversive Practices: Art under Conditions of Political Repression: 60s–80s / South America / Europe,* that took place in the Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart from 2010.[106] The exhibition shares this dissertation's interest in subversion in artistic practice in the 1980s, and its approach to comparing geographic regions. It also looks to the context of the specific social, economic, and political conditions of art's appearance. Where it differs is in making a deliberate choice to look at those countries in which democratic freedoms were limited. In so doing, the curators have avoided the discussion of artistic practices that may have subversive intentions, but will nonetheless be granted attention by more tolerant institutions, even if this may be called repressive tolerance. Repressive tolerance can more accurately describe the institutional condition of Flanders and the Netherlands, as social democratic states in which a degree of dissent is readily tolerated, even when that may result in rendering critique toothless.

In his edited volume on the subject of subversive artistic practice, Lieven De Cauter finds a way out of limiting the usage of the term 'subversive' to a discussion of those practices which appear in response to the conditions of political repression. He employs the term 'subversivity' to discuss artists or artworks which display a "disruptive attitude that tries to create openings, possibilities in the

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[102] Hal Foster, *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*, Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1985: 26.
[103] David Joselit, "An Allegory of Criticism", *October*, 103, winter 2003: 3. This can perhaps in part explain why in the United States, as compared to Flanders or the Netherlands, artists were more apt to incorporate a clearly explicated theory of institutional critique into their practices.
[104] Isabelle Graw, "Field Work", *Flash Art*, November/December 1990: 137.
[105] David Joselit, "An Allegory of Criticism", *October* 103, winter 2003: 11.
[106] Iris Dressler, "Subversive Practices: Art under Conditions of Political Repression: 60s–80s / South America / Europe", in: *Subversive Practices: Art under Conditions of Political Repression: 60s–80s / South America / Europe*, Hans D. Christ and Iris Dressler (eds), Ostfildern: Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart, 2010. To this can be added: Olga Fernández López, "Dissenting Exhibitions by Artists (1968-1998): Reframing Marxist Exhibition Legacy", PhD Thesis, Royal College of Art, London, 2011.

'closedness' of a system".[107] This dissertation follows the model put forth by De Cauter, who argues that "radical politics has dogma; subversivity questions these rigid belief systems."[108] Working in the institutional, and political, atmosphere of Western Europe during the years surrounding the Peaceful Revolution (Die Wende) in 1989, the artists under discussion in the case studies to follow do indeed show evidence of questioning rigid belief systems. Furthermore, this study takes the position that subversivity, much like institutional critique, is a moving target, which an artist can only hit by working within the particular context in order to achieve the desired outcome.

Mediation & Secondary Modes of Production

Mediation is a term that is frequently used without specificity.[109] While 'art mediation' is often related to educational programs that provide a didactic service for the visitor, offering possible entry points into relating to the work of art presented, this not the only source of art's mediation.[110] Aside from the discussion of mediation and remediation in media theory, which I will come to shortly, the relationship of mediation to artistic practice and the object of art have scantly received attention.[111] Mediation acts upon art, and is an element of its public presentation. The encounter of art in a museum cannot be described as 'immediate', to borrow a term from Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin; works of art are consistently framed and contextualized: both within the gallery, and through the circulation of an artwork's image.[112] Even outside of the museum, art is mediated through the conditions of its installation. Viewing art is, in short, always a mediated experience.

As Bruce Altshuler asserts, exhibitions are "creative works in their own right".[113] They include complex forms of mediation, with layers that contribute to the formation of a whole. Elements such as wall texts, an exhibition catalogue, the placement or arrangement of an artwork (alongside other artworks), a theme or narrative, the promotional materials distributed, the reputation of the exhibition organizer, or the history of the institution that features the work, are all aspects that act as mediators in the Latourian sense – they "transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry".[114] It is easy to challenge the assumed neutrality of such a mediator; these are elements that shape how the primary art object will be perceived. The inherent distrust of the benevolence of a mediator is plain to see when Susan Jones argues: "Those who drive cultural policy or employ, commission or otherwise 'mediate' between artists and audiences have defined their own agendas and expectations of artists and art and indeed of what art and artists are *for*".[115] While the term

[107] Lieven De Cauter, "Introduction: Excavating Subversion", in: *Art and Activism in the Age of Globalization*, Lieven De Cauter, Ruben De Roo, Karel Vanhaesebrouck (eds), Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2011: 9. Subversivity is distinct from the notion of subversion put forth by David Joselit, which he distinguishes from the revolutionary motives of the avant-garde.
[108] Lieven De Cauter, "Introduction: Excavating Subversion", in: *Art and Activism in the Age of Globalization*, Lieven De Cauter, Ruben De Roo, Karel Vanhaesebrouck (eds), Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2011: 9.
[109] There are many interdisciplinary fields in which the term 'mediation' has been adopted to signify more than 'conciliation'. See Sonia Livingstone, "On the mediation of everything: ICA presidential address 2008", *Journal of Communication*, 59 (1), 2009: 4. Livingston argues that the broad interest in the term lies in "the processes of mediation primarily because they reveal the changing relations among social structures and agents".
[110] A debate around art mediation and its importance for museum education departments (in relation to the curatorial) is discussed in such texts as: Irit Rogoff, "Turning", *e-flux,* #00, Nov 2008; Carmen Mörsch, "Alliances for Unlearning: On Gallery Education and Institutions of Critique", *Afterall*, 26, 2011; Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, "Changing Values in the Art Museum: Rethinking Communication and Learning", *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 6(1), 2004: 9-31; Maria Lind, "Why Mediate Art? Ten Fundamental Questions of Curating 4/10", *Mousse Journal of Contemporary Art*, 2011; Dorothea von Hantelmann, "The Curatorial Paradigm", *The Exhibitionist*, no. 4, June 2011.
[111] An exception is Jérôme Glicenstein's study of the aesthetic relationship between the object of art and the exhibition, which he frames as a form of mediation. He offers a typology of exhibitions such as 'the exhibition as fiction', 'as event or parlor game', or 'as art site'. Jérôme Glicenstein, *L'Art: une histoire d'expositions*, Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2009.
[112] Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999: 58.
[113] Bruce Altshuler, "A Canon of Exhibitions", *Manifesta Journal,* no. 11, 2010/2011: 8.
[114] Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005: 39.
[115] Susan Jones, "Instrumentality or artistic autonomy? – the pursuit of cultural value", the #culturalvalue initiative, 1 October 2012. Accessed through: culturalvalueinitiative.org/2012/10/01/instrumentality-or-artistic-autonomy-the-pursuit-of-cultural-value/.

is applied here to expressly human actors, the assumption can nonetheless be extended to non-human mediators, such as an exhibition catalogue, which plays a concerted role in reshaping perceptions of a work through the lens of those who mediate between artists and audiences.

Furthermore, there is an important relationship to acknowledge between mediation and media. All forms of media mediate information. But new forms of media, or new media, open up potential routes for critique or even subversion.[116] This is possible when artists embrace new media for the potential it offers to move beyond disciplinary constraints. Artists also look to new media for its capacity to visualize mediation, through remediation or hypermediation, as Bolter and Grusin argue in their seminal book, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (1999).[117] This dissertation, therefore, considers the specific choices employed by artists to mediate or remediate works of art, as strategic. Given the period of time in which this takes place, at the advent of computer-imaging technologies, new media were rife with possibilities and they pose a challenge to institutions that at this time were only beginning to offer space to video art.

It is easy to see why mediation is a fundamental concern of exhibition makers and artists who seek to critically question and expose the conditions of art's production, distribution, and reception. Taking over the mediation of one's own work offers the opportunity to step outside the binary relation of artist/viewer to influence how the viewer might receive the work. As such, mediation can be thought of as a secondary mode of production, which Helmut Draxler connects with the processes of "selecting, emphasizing, and above all recycling".[118] Exhibitions themselves can be considered secondary modes of production. These secondary modes, as Draxler argues, build upon original (or primary) modes of production, which become increasingly present, and valued, in a system that embraces postmodern ideas. Across the 1980s, these secondary modes proved integral to the practice of many artists and they will appear repeatedly in the case studies explored in this dissertation.

A feedback loop exists between the strategies that artists use to counter the effects of institutional mediation – often through the mediation of their own practices, or by exposing the mediating tendencies of the institution – and the adoption of those strategies by museums. As such, this is also a study of mediation as an antagonist. The infringement on the aesthetic autonomy of an artwork does not end as an affront to the work and the artist. It can also be a generative process, which pushes forward the development of new artistic strategies to open up new roads for expression and critique. I approach the adoption of artistic strategies into curatorial strategies, or artistic strategies embraced by institutional agents, as a generative process in the creation and exhibition of art. This allows for a discussion to be opened up of the various strategies taken by artists to subvert the conditions that shape the appearance and reception of art in Flanders and the Netherlands in the late 1980s.

[116] New media tend to be thought of as embodying older forms of media. Marshall McLuhan argued that the emergence of a new medium displaces older media, causing it to shift or change as a result. Television, for example, can be said to have had such an effect on cinema, impacting films made for cinematic viewing, and resulting in television's exposure of the older cinematic catalogue. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1964.

[117] Bolter and Grusin argue that one medium is in fact the embodiment of another or a combination of multiple mediums; it is their contention that a new medium remediates older media. The hypermediate they define as the opposite of the immediate, it "privileges fragmentation, indeterminacy, and heterogeneity and … emphasizes process or performance rather than the finished art object". Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999: 31.

[118] Helmut Draxler, "Crisis as a Form. Curating and the Logic of Mediation", *OnCurating,* Dorothy Richter and Rein Wolfs (eds), vol. #13/12: Institution as Medium. Curating as Institutional Critique/ Part II, 2012: 5.

Historiography

In what follows, I will offer an overview of the current state of research that is related to this dissertation. Rather than strictly a literature review, it also provides historical context for various debates this research is engaged with, namely with concern to artistic practices of the 1980s and the history of exhibitions. While receiving more attention in recent years, these are still relatively new terrains for research – let alone their intersection.

Art & Artists of the Long 1980s

Aside from the secondary modes of production that shape art's presentation, there is also the art object itself to be examined. Literature on art of the 1980s is especially marked with contradictions regarding the nature of art from this time. It characterizes art of the 1980s as a collision of 'low' and 'high' forms, as intermedial and defiant towards genre categorization with an emphasis on the spatial environment (installation and site-sensitive or site-specific art). Major developments can be observed in photography (staged and computer-generated), video, and (cable and satellite) television – which is evidenced in the case studies selected. Interdisciplinarity was key: interior design and sculpture could be intertwined, as could sculpture and architecture, installations and video.[119] Yet, at the same time, a typical reading of the 1980s portrays the decade as the moment of a return of object-based artworks (particularly of hermetic sculpture and expressionistic painting). Given the ease of commodifying these mediums, and their perceived apolitical content, such practices have been characterized as 'regressive'.[120] But even if one looks only at the production of sculpture and painting in the 1980s, such a characterization lumps together highly dissimilar works that cannot adequately be judged under the categories frequently applied to the period, such as neo-expressionism or commodity art. A sufficient analysis calls for greater complexity.

One way to look at sculpture and painting in this period is as a retreat from mediation through the embrace of an object-based medium. The bulk of critical literature on sculpture in Flanders and the Netherlands in the 1980s focuses on its poetic and self-referential qualities, the opacity of its intentions, and its commodity status. Of less concern has been the connection between this strand of sculpture-making and its relationship to the social, economic, and technological realities of postindustrial production. It is also rare that critics have invested in the intellectual labor of deciphering the 'denkmodel' fundamental to much sculptural practice of the time.[121] With regards to painting in Europe, the 1980s are often associated with the labels 'Nieuwe Wilden' or 'transavantguardia', which often (though not exclusively) showed a dramatic, and even aggressive style of painting reminiscent of neo-expressionism.[122] However, painting across the decade was in fact diverse in style and subject matter. Particularly from the mid-1980s forward, many painters can be found that deal with commentary and citation, such as John van 't Slot, Rob Scholte, Lily van den Stokker, or Marlene Dumas. The American

[119] Interdisciplinary in the sense that artistic disciplines are brought together.
[120] Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting", *October*, vol. 16, spring 1981: 39-68; Douglas Crimp, "The End of Painting", *October*, vol. 16, spring 1981: 69-86; Michael Gibbs, "De kunst van het vergeten, het verloren idealisme van de jaren zestig", *kunst & museumjournaal*, vol. 3, no. 6, 1992: 17; Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Michael Asher and the Conclusion of Modernist Sculpture", in: *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry. Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975*, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh (ed.), Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000: 1-39.
[121] For a description of the concept of 'denkmodel' applied to sculpture see: Marisa Melchers, "Ongekende ontwikkelingen in de beeldhouwkunst", in: *Vrij spel: Nederlandse Kunst 1970-1990*, Willemijn Stokvis, Kitty Zijlmans (eds), Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1993: 96-100.
[122] Through his writing and exhibition making, Rudi Fuchs is partly responsible for the overemphasis of neo-expressionist painting in the period. His Documenta VII (1982) offers a good impression of the type of painting promoted at the time, of artists like Georg Baselitz, AR Penck, Markus Lüpertz, and the Italian transavantguardia such as Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, and Enzo Cucchi. The term 'transavantguardia' was coined by the Italian art critic, Achille Bonito Oliva around 1980, and literally means beyond the avant-garde.

critic Benjamin Buchloh's essay, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression" (1981), published in translation in the *Museumjournaal* in 1983, was an oft-cited reference that passed among academy students in Flanders and the Netherlands. It reflects the tenor of critique that came together with this so-called return of painting (though such critical perspectives were rarely displayed by Dutch or Belgian critics).[123] Buchloh argued that:

> painting practices which operate under the naive assumption that gestural delineation, high contrast color, and heavy impasto are immediate (unmediated, noncoded) representations of the artist's desire propagate the traditional role model [of sexual difference or gender roles]; and they do so far more effectively than the painting practices which systematically investigate their own procedures.[124]

This contention can perhaps explain, at least in part, the turn away from the various flavors of neo-expressionism, which were more prevalent at the turn of the decade.

Other art forms, rather than retreating from mediation, appear to mimic its processes, employing it in an exaggerated manner. Photography, video, television, and computer art, which also featured in (museum) exhibitions at this time, often show a reflexive approach to their constituent media, which can be described as 'hypermediated'.[125] Of these forms, video art has received the most attention in literature. The history of video art in the Netherlands, beginning in the 1970s, and the inextricable relationship between the art form and the early (artists') initiatives that facilitated its production and distribution, has been explored in two books on the topic, from 2003 and 2005.[126] To these a volume has recently been published that looks at the development of media art in the years between 1985 and 2018.[127] A compendium of essays, it considers the various forces that have shaped the production of media art in the region, including – importantly – the impact of the shifts in funding policy of the Dutch government.[128]

On the whole, literature on contemporary art of Flanders and the Netherlands in the 1980s, when not focused on monographic studies, tends to hold on to categories that reflect traditional art historical divisions. Media art (or time-based media), in particular, has been cast into its own discursive networks and institutions, held aside from the beaux arts of sculpture and painting. Bringing together diverse art forms of painting, sculpture, video and television, as well as early computer-generated images, as this dissertation does, is unusual among extant sources.

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[123] See Peter de Ruiter, *De terugkeer van het schilderen. Kunstkritische opvattingen over een ijzersterk medium 1975-1989* (Kunstkritiek in Nederland 1885-2015, vol. 1), Jonneke Jobse (ed.), Rotterdam: nai010, 2014.

[124] Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting", *October*, vol. 16, spring 1981: 56.

[125] Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999: 31.

[126] Jeroen Boomgaard and Bart Rutten (eds), *The Magnetic Era*: *Video Art in the Netherlands 1970-1985*, Rotterdam: NAi/Amsterdam: Netherlands Media Art Institute, 2003; Sebastian Lopez, *A Short History of Dutch Video Art*, Rotterdam: Episode Publishers/Amsterdam: Gate Foundation, 2005.

[127] Sanneke Huisman and Marga van Mechelen (eds), *Critical History of Media Art in the Netherlands: Platforms, Policies, Technologies,* Prinsenbeek: Uitgeverij Jap Sam Books, 2019.

[128] To these, Sander Kletter's *Turbulentie rond videokunst. Kunstkritische reflecties op een nieuw medium 1970-2010* (Rotterdam: nai010 uitgevers, 2016) which brings together selection of reviews and essays on video art in the Netherlands between 1970 and 2010 can also be added.

Exhibition History

Exhibitions as a subject of study began to receive academic attention in the late 1980s. This came together with a boom in curatorial study programs.[129] From this time forward "curating became a possible area of study as much as a professional career choice", which in turn led to a proliferation of publishing on the topic.[130] Periodic exhibitions were among the first to receive notice, such as Documenta and the Venice biennale.[131] Until that time, the perception of the contemporary as post-historic resulted in an under-theorization of exhibitions and their social and institutional ramifications.[132] Combined with what Bruce Altshuler calls a "curatorial boom of the 1980s and 1990s", a reframing of art history, which sees the exhibition as a vehicle through which to comprehend works of art, can be seen in literature.[133] Altshuler has proposed the formation of a canon of exhibitions as a centering of knowledge for the study of art history.[134] Others have resisted the hierarchical formation of a canon, instead writing in detail about specific cases or structured in relation to a particular concept.[135] Several edited volumes of essays that reflect upon developments in exhibition making have been influential for this study, such as *Thinking about Exhibitions* (1996), or *The Biennial Reader: An Anthology on Large-Scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art* (2009).[136] Another notable development in reflecting upon exhibition history has been the emergence of what Reesa Greenberg calls "remembering exhibitions", which forefront the concept, context, or experience of an exhibition of the past.[137]

Still, few sources use the study of exhibitions as a means to generate findings about the mechanisms of institutions, of tendencies in display, or of the interrelationship between artists and institutions. Considering that exhibitions are where artists, artworks, the presenting institution, and a

[129] O'Neill takes 1987 as the starting point for his study of the evolution of curatorial discourse, which marks the year in which the first post-graduate curatorial training programs were established in Europe (at the l'Ecole du Magasin in Grenoble) and in the United States (at the Whitney independent Study Program, which was renamed Curatorial and Critical Studies). These formed the model for countless curating courses to follow. Paul O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s*), Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012.

[130] Paul O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s*), Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012: 2. Furthermore, it was also at this time that the number of global exhibitions – biennials, triennials, etc. – began to increase sharply, leading to more potential work for curators. See: Ivo Mesquita, "Biennials, Biennials, Biennials…", in: *Beyond the Box: Diverging Curatorial Practices*, Melanie Townsend (ed.), Banff, Canada: Banff Centre Press, 2003: 63-67.

[131] These sources include: Lawrence Alloway, *The Venice Biennale: 1895–1968. From Salon to Goldfish Bowl*, London: Faber and Faber, 1969; Dieter Westecker, *documenta–Dokumente 1955 bis 1968: Texte und Fotografien*, Kassel, 1972; Walter Grasskamp, "Documenta – Kunst des XX. Jahrhunderts. Internationale Ausstellung im Museum Fridericianum in Kassel", in: *Kunst der Ausstellung. Eine Dokumentation dreißig exemplarischer Kunstausstellungen dieses Jahrhunderts, (The Art of Exhibition. Documentation of Thirty Exemplary Art Exhibitions of This Century)*, Bernd Klüser and Katharina Hegewisch (eds), Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1991: 116-25; Walter Grasskamp, "Degenerate Art and Documenta I – Modernism Ostracized and Disarmed", in: *Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles*, Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff (eds), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994: 63-94; Walter Grasskamp, "For Example, Documenta, or How is Art History Produced?", in: *Thinking about Exhibitions*, Reesa Greenberg, Bruce Ferguson, Sandy Nairne (eds), London: Routledge 1996: 48-56; Michael Glasmeier and Karin Stengel (eds), *50 Years Documenta 1955-2005: Archive in Motion: Documenta Manual*, Kassel: Kunsthalle Fridericianum/ Göttingen: Steidl, 2005.

[132] In an account of his experience delving into the archival history of Documenta, Walter Grasskamp offers insight into why exhibition history has been largely ignored until recent decades. In part as a result of the "gap between the historical and contemporary", many exhibitions have failed to document their own histories, or to see themselves as making or contributing to the shaping of subsequent exhibitions. Walter Grasskamp, "To Be Continued: Periodic Exhibitions (dOCUMENTA, for Example)", *Tate Papers*, Landmark Exhibitions Issue 12, 2009. Accessed through: tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/12/to-be-continued-periodic-exhibitions-documenta-for-example.

[133] Bruce Altshuler, "A Canon of Exhibitions", *Manifesta Journal*, no. 11, 2010/2011: 5.

[134] Bruce Altshuler, *Salon to Biennial: Exhibitions That Made Art History*: *1863-1959*, vol. 1, London: Phaidon, 2008 and *Biennials and Beyond: Exhibitions That Made Art History: 1962-2002*, vol. 2, London: Phaidon Press, 2013. The conference: "Landmark Exhibitions: Contemporary Art Shows Since 1968", that took place in October 2008 is often cited as influential (a collaboration between Tate Modern and Jan van Eyck Academie with the Royal College of Art and The London Consortium). More recently, Jens Hoffman's *Show Time: The 50 Most Influential Exhibitions of Contemporary* Art, New York: D.A.P., 2014 (in which the most influential exhibitions rarely predate 1990) is another attempt to produce a self-affirming canon.

[135] The ongoing *Afterall* series, for example, presents the history of an exhibition in each volume.

[136] Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne (eds), *Thinking about Exhibitions*, London: Routledge, 1996; Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal and Solveig Øvstebø (eds), *The Biennial Reader*: *An Anthology on Large-Scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art,* Bergen Kunsthall, Bergen, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2009.

[137] Reesa Greenberg, "'Remembering Exhibitions': From Point to Line to Web", *Tate Papers*, Landmark Exhibitions Issue 12, 2009. Accessed through: tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/12/remembering-exhibitions-from-point-to-line-to-web; Reesa Greenberg, "Archival Remembering Exhibitions", *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 1: 2, 2012: 159-177.

viewing public come together, there is much to be learned from their study that can shed light on each of these elements, and the way they interact with one another.[138] Furthermore, while exhibitions reveal a great deal about the agents involved, they also show the developments of an institutional lineage of presentations of art. At the same time, they are illustrative of shifts in cultural policy, which have a notable effect on what is shown in institutions and how it is presented. For the most part, extant literature on exhibition studies does not consider the contextual factors that shape the appearance of art, tending instead to glorify certain figures, or institutions as agents responsible for the event.[139] The interrelation between artistic strategies and the developments of exhibitions has been an oversight in scholarship in this period. Even more so, as Andrew Graciano points out, those exhibitions staged "without the sanction of an established art authority", in alternative venues, or in alternative formats, have been even further beyond the purview of researchers.[140]

Several sources to come out of the Netherlands testify to the fact that the exhibition becomes particularly important in the 1980s as an artform of its own.[141] The endorsement of group exhibitions with explicit themes or an overriding concept in contrast to solo shows, went hand in hand with growing reverence for the curator – and thus the curator's increasing visibility. Likewise, exhibitions beyond the walls of the museum, throughout the city or in places with a particular historical character, also appear throughout the latter part of the 1980s. These exhibitions often came with what Sandra Spijkerman calls an 'open concept', bringing together multiple sites, and multiple artists under an overarching idea.[142] In turn, artists developed strategies for contending with this prevailing focus on exhibitions: the mode of display was vital and the mechanisms that shaped exhibitions often became a subject of artistic investigation.

Curators as Mediators

Throughout this dissertation, attention is given to those responsible for making decisions about art's display. At times this is the work of artists, taking control of their own presentation (as was the case in Aorta). At other times, it is the work of curators. Suffice to say, curatorial figures are deserving of attention for any study that seeks to understand the decision-making process entailed between artist and exhibiting institution. While exhibition makers, such as Harald Szeemann, had garnered evident recognition in the 1960s and 1970s, as O'Neill and Altshuler (among others) have pointed out, the role of the curator and the discourse surrounding exhibitions expanded in the late 1980s and into the 1990s, with more critical fanfare and publicity. As O'Neill explains, "by the 1980s, the idea of the 'curated'

[138] Paula Marincola, *What Makes a Great Exhibition?*, Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative, Philadelphia Center for Arts and Heritage, 2006: 9.
[139] An exception is Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996. Another is, Stefano Collicelli Cagol, "Exhibition History and the Institution as a Medium", *Stedelijk Studies*, Linda Boersma and Patrick van Rossem (eds), issue #2, spring 2015.
[140] This has been pointed out in a recent volume edited by Andrew Graciano that attempts to fill a gap in the history of exhibitions by discussing 'alternative exhibitions' (but makes only a brief nod to exhibitions post-Broodthaers). Andrew Graciano (ed.), *Exhibiting outside the academy, salon and biennial, 1775–1999*: *Alternative venues for display*, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2015: 1. There have been attempts to look into such activity in New York. See: Julie Ault (ed.), *Alternative Art New York: 1965-1985*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2002; and Lauren Rosati and Mary Anne Staniszewski (eds), *Alternative Histories: New York Art Spaces, 1960-2010*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012.
[141] Evelyn Beer and Riet de Leeuw, *L'Exposition imaginaire: The art of exhibiting in the eighties*, The Hague: SDU Uitgeverij, 1989; Riet de Leeuw (ed.), *De kunst van het tentoonstellen: De presentatie van beeldende kunst in Nederland van 1800 tot heden*, Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1991; Marlene Dumas and Roos Theuws, "The art of exhibiting", *Metropolis M*, no. 3, 1990: 30-33, and the follow-up series by Leontine Coelewij, Dominic van den Boogerd, and Henriëtte Heezen, "The art of exhibiting: the exhibition as art", *Metropolis M*, vol. 1, 1991: 30-39; Sandra Spijkerman, "De tentoonstellingsmaker in de hoofdrol?" in: *Vrij spel: Nederlandse Kunst 1970-1990*, Willemijn Stokvis and Kitty Zijlmans (eds), Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1993: 261-288.
[142] Sandra Spijkerman, "De tentoonstellingsmaker in de hoofdrol?", in: *Vrij spel: Nederlandse Kunst 1970-1990*, Willemijn Stokvis and Kitty Zijlmans (eds), Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1993: 273.

exhibition had been established as an entity of critical reflection in its own right, with the figure of the individual curator at the center of debates as the sole author of the group exhibition form."[143]

It should be noted that while the prominence of the curator was on the rise internationally, in Flanders and the Netherlands public scrutiny of this figure reached new heights. In Flanders, Jan Hoet, in particular, occupied an almost ubiquitous role in the media in discussions regarding the government's (lack of) subsidization of art in Flanders. He would even go so far as to run for a seat (as lijstduwer), in the Flemish Christian People's Party (Vlaamse Christelijke Volkspartij, CVP), all in an effort to ensure adequate funding for the development of publicly accessible contemporary art collections in Ghent and Ostend.[144] Hoet drew a line in the sand regarding his public position as the defender of art; he was a fighter on its behalf. He set himself in clear opposition to authorities who would not support his vision for increased prominence of art in Flanders (opinions vary as to whether this was the most beneficial approach to further the contemporary art infrastructure in the region).[145] Despite the widespread public attention Hoet brought to the plight of contemporary art, his outsized role (he was commonly referred to as the 'art pope' of Flanders) resulted in the promotion of a limited number of artists whom he offered disproportionate support.

In the Netherlands, the visibility of certain director/curator figures was no less pronounced. Generous state support of art museums and the construction of the museum as a public trust ensured that the position of the director was one of public accountability. Yet beyond the political responsibilities of the position, newspapers reveal a fetishization of the director as a privileged visionary with great responsibility. This is best illustrated in the heated competition that ensued between Rudi Fuchs and Wim Beeren for the position of director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1984 and 1985. Strong feelings regarding the candidates and their particular stances on which artists to support, which art to show, and how to show it led to divisions among their supporters, who positioned themselves behind one of the two prospective curator/directors.[146]

Curators can be considered mediators in more than one sense of the word. They mediate between the artist and the institution, between the public and the art on view; but they are also agents with their own agendas, seeking to make their own statement through the production of exhibitions. Among the directors and curators to be discussed in this dissertation (in order of appearance in the chapters to follow), Wim Beeren (during his tenure at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam), Saskia Bos (at De Appel), Bart Cassiman (Project leader of *Initiatief 86*), Jan Hoet (at the Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst in Ghent), and Dorine Mignot (curator at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam) are important players. Each took a distinct approach to their role as facilitator of the presentation of art to a public, and together they provide an apt characterization of curatorial attitudes of the short time period in question. Inevitably each approach had a distinct impact on the strategies thus pursued by artists working within, or in response to, the institutions they led. The outcome of this back-and-forth is revealed in each chapter.

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[143] Paul O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012: 5.

[144] While Hoet received enough votes to be elected to a seat on the Ghent council in 1994, he did not end up taking the position. He offered to stand down if the council would finally award the funds for his long sought-after museum of contemporary art. They agreed. See: Ben van der Velden, "Conservator Jan Hoet werd politicus om geld voor Gents museum; 'Hier wordt energie samengebald'", *NRC Handelsblad*, 8 Nov 1996: Sectie Kunst, 6.

[145] When it would finally come time to open the doors to a new museum in Ghent in 1999, Hoet would not stay long as its director. In 2003 he moved on to MARTa in Herford, Germany, where he was appointed as founding director. After MARTa's opening in 2005, Hoet remained there only three years.

[146] Several newspaper articles pitted Fuchs and Beeren against one another as potential successors to Edy de Wilde with portraits printed side by side. See for example, Hubert Smeets, "Amsterdam wil Fuchs als directeur Stedelijk Museum", *NRC Handelsblad*, 8 Jan 1985: 1; or Frank van Dijl, "Boymans-directeur voor in Museumrace. Beeren: bedachtzaam Fuchs: onbesuisd", *Het Vrije Volk: Democratisch-Socialistisch Dagblad*, 24 Jan 1985: 4. After being awarded the position, this rivalry had far-reaching consequences for Beeren's tenure as director, which are discussed in Chapter 1.

Among these figures, Hoet has received the most attention in literature, though much of what is available tends to focus more on his myth than on his curatorial methods (though *De Witte Raaf* has made concerted efforts to dispel some of these myths and reflect upon cultural policy developments together with Hoet's curatorial achievements).[147] On Beeren, there has been some attempt made to reflect upon his tenure as director of the Stedelijk, though this often repeats generalizations, pointing to specific acquisitions and delving less deeply into specific exhibitions. The period before his directorship has received more attention; particularly with his work on the exhibitions *Op Losse Schroeven* (1969) and outside the Stedelijk, *Sonsbeek '71* (1971).[148] On Cassiman's contributions to exhibition-making in the 1980s and 1990s, literature tends to take the form of newspaper articles and exhibition reviews, with particular attention to his role in organizing *Initiatief 86* and the exhibitions to accompany Antwerp's year as cultural capital of Europe (1993).[149] On the contributions of Bos there remains much to be written. Some writing has been produced on her curatorial projects in volumes on the history of her period as curator of De Appel, and on her edition of *Sonsbeek '86*.[150] Finally, on the work of Mignot, the only literature that has thus far looked into her contribution to the field of curating is an essay by Karen Archey that focuses on the heroic efforts made by Mignot, Barbara London, and Kathy Rae Huffman to bring time-based media into contemporary art museums in the 1970s and 1980s.[151]

The Market & the Museum

The rise of the curator is second only to the growth of the contemporary art market as a topic of interest for literature on art of the 1980s. Many authors have discussed the impact of this market on the production and presentation of art, with the art critic, gallerist, and art gallery likewise receiving attention.[152] Two volumes on the history of art galleries in Amsterdam are important to note in this context for their focus on the importance of independent, alternative galleries to artistic production in the decade. The first, *Art gallery exhibiting, the gallery as a vehicle for art* (1996) brings together voices to reflect upon the relationship of the art gallery to art, looking at the years between the 1960s to the 1990s.[153] While it attempts a broad overview, and includes international voices, the focus remains limited to the artistic circle of Paul Andriesse. *Positioning the Art Gallery. Het Amsterdamse*

[147] Among the many books that focus on Hoet's persona are: Mark van Dyck and Dorian Van der Brempt (eds), *Monologen met Jan Hoet*, Leuven: Kritak, 1989; Alexander Farenholtz and Markus Hartmann (eds), *Jan Hoet – On the Way to Documenta IX*, Berlin: Edition Catz, 1991; René De Bok, *Jan Hoet: Tussen mythe en werkelijkheid*, Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 2003; Laurens De Keyser, *In de wereld van Jan Hoet*, Ghent: Uitgeverij Borgerhoff & Lamberigts, 2008; Hans den Hartog Jager, *Jan Hoet*, Veurne: Uitgeverij Kannibaal, 2014; Jan Haerynck, *De luchtkunstenaar: Jan Hoet*, Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2014.

[148] Wim Beeren, *Wim Beeren. Om de kunst. Opvattingen van een museumman over moderne kunst, kunstenaars, musea en kunstbeleid*, Rotterdam: NAi Uitgevers, 2005. Theresa Gleadowe, Christian Rattemeyer, Steven ten Thije, et al., *Exhibiting the New Art: 'Op Losse Schroeven' and 'When Attitudes Become Form' (1969)*, London: Afterall Books, 2010; Jef Cornelis (dir.) *Sonsbeek buiten de perken*, 1971, BRT, 00:46:03. In the collection of the Argos Centre for Audiovisual Arts, Brussels.

[149] See: Jan De Zutter, "Initiatief '86 of hoe een mug een olifant baarde", *De Morgen*, 21 June 1986; Marc Ruyters, "Tegen '92 zou Brussel zowat de Kunsthalle van Europa moeten zijn. Interview met Bart Cassiman", *De Morgen*, 28 Sept 1988; Pieter Entrop, "Bart Cassiman", *Metropolis M,* no. 4, 1991: 25-31; Bart Cassiman, *Espacio mental*, Valencia: Generalitat Valenciana, 1991; Jos Van Den Bergh, "Bart Cassiman on his show 'The Sublime Void'", *Forum International*, no. 18, May-Aug 1993; Bart Cassiman, "Par amour de l'art", *De Morgen,* 1 Dec 1995.

[150] Edna van Duyn (ed.), *If Walls Had Ears, De Appel: 1984-2005*, Amsterdam: De Appel, 2005; Jeroen Boomgaard, Marga van Mechelen, and Miriam van Rijsingen (eds), *Als de kunst er om vraagt: de sonsbeektentoonstellingen 1971, 1986, 1993*, Amsterdam: Uitgave van de Stichting Tentoonstellingsinitiatieven, 2001. There are also notable interviews such as, Bert Steevensz, "Saskia Bos", *Metropolis M*, no. 4, 1991: 19-24.

[151] Karen Archey, "Held Essays on Visual Art: Dorine, Barbara, Kathy", *The Brooklyn Rail*, Dec 2017-Jan 2018. Accessed through: brooklynrail.org/2017/12/art/THE-HELD-ESSAYS-ON-VISUAL-ART-Dorine-Barbara-Kathy.

[152] Such as: Paul Ardenne and Michel Vale, "The Art Market in the 1980s", *International Journal of Political Economy,* vol. 25, no. 2, summer 1995: 100-128; Annamma Joy and John F. Sherry, "Disentangling the Paradoxical Alliances between Art Market and Art World", *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, vol. 6(3), 2003: 155-181; Derrick Chong, "Marketing in art business: Exchange relationships by commercial galleries and art museums", in: *The Art Business*, Iain Robertson and Derrick Chong (eds), London: Routledge, 2008: 115-138; Olav Velthuis and Erica Coslor, "Financialization of Art Markets", in: *Handbook of the Sociology of Finance,* Karin Knorr Cetina and Alex Preda (eds), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012; Olav Velthuis, "Markets", in: *Contemporary Art: Themes and Histories, 1989 to the Present*, Alexander Dumbadze and Suzanne Hudson (eds), West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.

[153] Paul Andriesse and Mariska van den Berg (eds), *Art gallery exhibiting, the gallery as a vehicle for art*, Amsterdam: Paul Andriesse/Uitgeverij De Balie, 1996.

galeriewezen in een internationale context (2012) is more resolute in its aim. Appropriating a few of the same essays as the earlier volume, with more historical distance it considers how galleries such as Art & Project in the 1970s paved the way for a new generation of galleries such as The Living Room Gallery, Galerie Hans Gieles, Lumen Travo, and Torch in the 1980s, all of which had strong ties to artists' initiatives.[154] Both books consider the conflict in autonomy brought about by commercial interests in institutions that, as well-intentioned as they may be, are nonetheless in the businesss of selling art. Still, they show how the situation here, too, is not so black and white, in that galleries can also contribute to pushing innovation forward and supporting unconventional practices.

Capitulations made to the market in the 1980s, both on behalf of artists and art's institutions, was as much lamented as celebrated. The art critic Ludo Bekkers, writing on Flemish art, offered this account of the status of the art market that had developed across the 1980s:

> The art market has strongly internationalized with shifts to the United States and Japan. As a result, prices for works of art have risen to excessive dimensions, although it should be noted that an artwork does not have an intrinsic price. Those who want to acquire it are willing to pay, within the limits that they themselves determine, the price that they think it is worth. The fact that those boundaries have been pushed to the absurd is actually a symptom of the devaluation of art itself because the concept of value of a work of art is no longer confined solely to its fundamental qualities, but also and above all to its mercantile result.[155]

Bekker was not alone in this perception of art of the period as rife with cynicism. In his essay, "The art of forgetting, the lost idealism of the sixties" (1992), Dutch artist and critic Michael Gibbs argued that in looking back on the 1980s, it was perhaps better to forget art altogether until a time that it might "regain its radical sharpness."[156]

On the other end of the spectrum are those who express confidence in artists like Jeff Koons, who was shown repeatedly over Beeren's tenure at the Stedelijk, in *Horn of Plenty* (1989) and *Energieën* (1990) and in his own retrospective in 1992.[157] One of Beeren's best-known acquisitions was Koons' *Ushering in Banality* (1988, purchased by the Stedelijk in 1989). Koons used kitsch to put forth a simplistic critique of consumption, greed, and fame in the art world – matters which increasingly became associated with art museums. In 1989, sounding reminiscent of the voices behind *Talking Back to the Media* (discussed in Chapter 3), Koons explained: "I want artists to get the propaganda machinery in their hands again. I want to be in control, otherwise another industry takes over the power of the image, the entertainment industry or advertising for example. I want to prevent that."[158] While Koons' statement betrays the artist's preoccupation, not unusual for the 1980s, with gaining control over the mediating apparatus, from today's perspective it is rather absurd to imagine Koons as an artist in defense of class consciousness against the corrupting influence of the spectacle. In breaking down boundaries between 'art' and 'kitsch', Koons merely offered a new boundary in its stead: one that

[154] Noor Mertens and Astrid Vorstermans (eds), *Positioning the Art Gallery. Het Amsterdamse galeriewezen in een internationale context*, Amsterdam: Valiz, 2012. Essays by Jack Tilton, Jo Baer, Jan van Adrichem and Adriaan van Ravesteijn appear in both volumes. Additionally, in 2018, a public program of conversations was hosted by Daniela Apice, Dorothe Orczyk, and Noor Mertens at the Rijksakademie in a series entitled "The Gallerists: Radical Mediators in Contemporary Art from the Sixties Onwards", which invited the founders of Art & Project, Galerie van Gelder, The Living Room, and Lumen Travo (all in Amsterdam), Wide White Space (Antwerp), and Galerie René Block (West Berlin) to speak to the pioneering role of their galleries.

[155] Bekkers also points out that this is a "global evolution that has consequences for, among other things, the purchasing possibilities of the museums." Ludo Bekkers, "De beeldende kunsten in Vlaanderen. Recente ontwikkelingen", *Ons Erfdeel*, vol. 33, 1990: 63.

[156] Michael Gibbs, "De kunst van het vergeten, het verloren idealisme van de jaren zestig", *kunst & museumjournaal,* vol. 3, no. 6, 1992: 17.

[157] The retrospective brought an attendance of 85,000 visitors – a blockbuster for the time. Wim Beeren, "Jeff Koons. Pro. Iconen van de alledaagse banaliteit", in: *Wim Beeren – om de kunst. Opvattingen van een museumman over moderne kunst, kunstenaars, musea en kunstbeleid*, Rotterdam: NAi Uitgevers, 2005: 411.

[158] Anna Tilroe, "Interview with Jeff Koons", *Haagse Post*, Dec 1989.

consolidated the influence of fame and wealth in the 'art world' through easily-digested critique-as-commodity/commodity-as-critique.

What is most important for the purposes of this dissertation is the hypervisibility of this form of pseudo-critique in the late 1980s and its embedding within the museum as well as the art market. It is only logical that celebrating practices that involved the exaggeration of kitsch, the promotion of excess, and the drawing of profit from the targets of its alleged critique, would pose a challenge to the prospect of authentically critical practice. Was it the case that the embrace of such practices made it more difficult for critique to have resonating influence within these institutional structures? This dissertation endeavors to consider whether in the late 1980s there remained potential for critique, both within and beyond art's institutions, through an examination of the case studies in question.

Structure of the Thesis

Each of the chapters of this dissertation includes a discussion of two exhibitions, which illustrate a dialectic that exists between artists and institutional mediators, and the (productive) tension that occurs when critical practices engage with the museum. In the first and final chapters, this takes place in the form of exhibitions within exhibitions; in the remaining chapters, exhibitions have been devised as a counterpoint to one another, in response to exclusion (Chapter 2) or at the behest of the museum to draw in artistic practice that had previously sought alternative forms of distribution (Chapter 3). The chapters do not always follow a chronological line, and it is important to be aware that this is not an account that intends to show a progressive development; instead each case presents a unique constellation of events that together demonstrate the variety of mediums and strategies that can be found in the late 1980s. The chapters have been organized so that the reader can build upon concepts thus far introduced, gradually increasing in the complexity of the interplay between the strategy employed by the artists and the significance of new media, from the use of the museum gallery as a medium, up to the production of fictional exhibition spaces through computer-generated images.

To begin, Chapter 1, 'Occupying Space' introduces an exhibition in which two spaces of Amsterdam's 'alternative circuit', Aorta and De Appel are invited to occupy galleries within the Stedelijk Museum, the city's most prestigious venue for contemporary art. With the stated intent of the exhibition, "to provide a documentary account of the wide range of artistic activity occurring in Amsterdam", the Stedelijk Museum captured artistic production in the city in *As Far as Amsterdam Goes…* (1985), a frenzied show.[159] Outlining the conditions in which these alternative spaces came to play a crucial role in Amsterdam in the 1980s, the chapter looks to Aorta – already introduced as an artists' initiative founded with an anti-establishment imperative – as one case study, describing the process by which the space underwent a unique process of institutionalization. When artists associated with Aorta accepted an invitation to fill a gallery in Wim Beeren's first exhibition as director of the Stedelijk Museum, they threw into question their outsider status. This, in combination with the refined nature of Aorta's installation in the Stedelijk, led critics to declare that Aorta had lost its revolutionary spirit. Yet this conclusion was biased by generalizations about painting and sculpture as regressive and apolitical, and of Aorta as unruly and counter-culture. This chapter, therefore, looks closely at the decisions made by the artists who represented Aorta in the Stedelijk, to postulate whether they may, in

[159] Press Release, *As Far as Amsterdam Goes…* Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 11 Nov 1985. Exhibition archive, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam: Wat Amsterdam betreft… (I), 22.11 – 24.11.85: SM 1985 15.

fact, have sought to resist the recuperation of their creative labor through the installation they formulated.

The other case study in Chapter 1 explores the strategy pursued by De Appel in the same exhibition. The curatorial leadership of De Appel under Saskia Bos was inspired by strategies at work in artistic practices that reflected upon their surroundings, and created a framework within the exhibition to which artists could respond. Under a separate series entitled, *De Appel in the Décor of the Stedelijk*, artists were offered the space for their own installations. Wim T. Schippers, Guillaume Bijl, Barbara Bloom, and Floris Guntenaar used the opportunity provided by the format of an exhibition within an exhibition, creating site-sensitive works and making use of the sovereignty inherent in the practice of installation. Bearing in mind the cultural policies that were impacting art and artists in the Netherlands in the 1980s, artists associated with Aorta and De Appel were forced to navigate structures increasingly focused on validation by commercial success. This chapter reflects upon the strategies put to use by both platforms, using the attention granted by the Stedelijk, but also considering its position as a powerful mediator, to consider whether the artists were ultimately successful in establishing critical distance from within.

Chapter 2, 'Taking Initiative' looks at another attempt to encapsulate local artistic production, albeit on a larger scale. It turns its gaze to Ghent – not only a distinct geographic setting, but a context that differed socially and politically in ways that impacted artistic production in the late 1980s. This chapter considers the events that ensued in response to *Initiatief 86,* a manifestation to bring international attention to art being made in Belgium. The central event of *Initiatief 86* involved an exhibition organized by three foreign curators, Kasper König, Jean-Hubert Martin, and Gosse W. Oosterhof, each of whom was invited to select works by contemporary Belgian artists. In this way, the initiative sought to promote and elevate art in Belgium to an international audience, and had lofty aims of providing increased opportunities for artists, both at home and abroad.

Jan Hoet developed an additional, complimentary exhibition. The better-known *Chambres d'amis*, was spread throughout the city of Ghent in the interiors of private homes. 51 artists were invited to install a work in as-many homes. The exclusive nature of *Initiatief 86*, having invited international curators to select a small number of Belgian artists, and the tendency of Hoet's heavily promoted, large-scale exhibition to overwhelm individual works, led to the widespread disenfranchisement of local artists. In response, two exhibitions initiated by artists soon took form: *Initiatief d'amis* and *Antichambre*. As was the case with the artists' initiatives discussed in Chapter 1, these 'alternative exhibitions' employed a do-it-yourself approach, in which artists took production into their own hands. Seven artists worked together to curate *Initatief d'amis* in Vooruit, a cultural center in Ghent, with the intended goal of making an exhibition in the most democratic manner possible. The artists responsible opted to remain neutral towards the main event, framing the exhibition as a 'supplement' rather than a critique of *Initiatief 86* and *Chambres d'amis*. Another exhibition was less neutral: *Antichambre*, held in an abandoned textile factory at the edge of town, included approximately two-hundred artists. The organizers of the exhibition, also artists, refused to hold a selection process, and instead included everything submitted, framing the lack of selection as a political act – a salon des refusés.

This chapter looks into these artist-initiated exhibitions, and their relationship to the central event. While they set out alternative conditions, it was their reactionary position that links them. Not to be forgotten, Chapter 2 also considers how several artists that were included in the official events developed their own strategies of critique from within, and how a seemingly promotional, made-for-television program served as a mediator that effectively reconfigured the reception of the events of Ghent's summer of 1986. A six-hour, live-televised program directed by Jef Cornelis,

De langste dag (*The Longest Day*) (1986) exposes site-specificity and the spectacularization of the art event as strategies exploited by the museum and the governing bodies that funded the endeavor, revealing the mechanisms that underlie exhibitions.

In Chapter 3, 'Tuning Out/Tuning In', we return to Amsterdam, but stay outside the museum, focusing on a group of artists who saw in mass media a means to reach a larger audience by flooding its channels with their own content. Seeking a way out of the isolation of traditional art spheres, artists active in the city's video art scene, David Garcia and Raul Marroquín, devised a manifestation called *Talking Back to the Media* (1985). It brought together artists, from Ulises Carrión and Dara Birnbaum to General Idea and Hans Haacke, who sought in various ways to deconstruct notions of objectivity and neutrality in mass media. Invited artists created works – many of which 'adapted' images from the mass media through strategies of reinterpretation or parody – and distributed them through mass media, from cable television to the radio, in video and film festivals, through a lecture series, posters, a magazine, and a photography exhibition. They thus inundated Amsterdam with artist-produced content.

Two years later, the Stedelijk Museum reinserted itself into the art on television equation by hosting two exhibitions, *Revision* and *The Arts for Television* (1987) under the umbrella title, *Kunst voor Televisie*. These shows featured a vast array of works on television, including some of those involved in *Talking Back to the Media*. At the same time, the museum stepped in to commission works of art for television, one for a series on the VPRO network, and another for a program called *Time Code* that involved a collaboration between countries in Europe and North America. Commissioning works for television brought the Stedelijk, and other art institutions, the kind of notoriety that can only be achieved through engaging with mass media. At the same time, in tying practices that had sought alternative modes of distribution to the museum, they incorporated critical practices into their institutional agenda. However, the works on view cannot be said to have been recuperated equally; some artists approached the museum as yet another mass medium, as an apparatus to be exposed from within.

Lastly, Chapter 4, 'Generating Uncertainty', takes another look at artists who use the exhibition as a medium. This time, however, it is through the use of computer-generated images that artists were able to deconstruct the museum's conventions. The chapter dives into two exhibitions that occurred at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam in 1991: Gerald Van Der Kaap's *Hover Hover* and Fortuyn/O'Brien's MARBLE*PUBLIC*. For *Hover Hover* (1991, Dorine Mignot), Gerald Van Der Kaap made use of emergent technology to produce computer-modified images, which could be printed out in high resolution. Van Der Kaap made use of this new technology to exaggerate the manipulation of photographs. *Hover Hover* was accompanied by a manual, designed by the artist, that featured a different collection of computer-modified images labeled 'installation views'. While purely the product of the artists' imagination, these images appear to feature the same museum galleries, each more implausibly installed than the last.

For MARBLE*PUBLIC* (1991, Wim Beeren), Fortuyn/O'Brien, an artist duo that brought together the intellects of Irene Fortuyn and Robert O'Brien, used computer-rendered images of their sculptures to make visible the power structures at play in art's presentation. These images were printed in the publication that accompanied their retrospective exhibition at the Stedelijk. In lieu of photographs, the sculptures are shown on its pages in printed images of computer-generated galleries, each organized in a constellation determined by the artists or one of three invited 'curators'. While *Hover Hover* and MARBLE*PUBLIC* come from distinct conceptual perspectives, and are concerned with different mediums, they utilize emergent media to throw into question the fixed status of the 'real' exhibition, re-imag(in)ing the galleries. This chapter sets out to consider what lies behind the choice of both artists to use emergent media to such a purpose, suggesting that the remediation of the museum's galleries might in fact be intended as a critique of the circumstances facing art at the end of the long 1980s.

The heightened interest of artists in the conditions of art's display in the late 1980s can be seen as an outcome of historic factors that come to a head at this time, and will be touched upon in each chapter: the evolution of the contemporary art exhibition into an event – a highly choreographed, widely promoted, and profit-driven affair with the (star) curator as the wheeler-dealer par excellence; the considerable sway of mediation on the primary mode of production, and the pervasive influence (and corporatization) of mass media; the rampant speculation of the contemporary art market, with its endless desire for novelty and 'edge'; the return of object-based practices following the dematerialization of art in the 1970s; and the embrace of artistic labor by policymakers as a lubricant to accelerate economic growth and promote regional identity. Each of these factors contributed to a precarious environment for aesthetic autonomy, both in and outside art's institutions. By examining the strategies employed by artists to engage with these conditions, this dissertation sets out to draw conclusions about the possibilities of mediation, the potential for criticism within the institution, and the means by which artists and museums, antagonistically, may push each other forward.

INTRODUCTION – FIGURES

Fig. 1.
Peter Giele during his performance of *The Artists Dreaming of His Own Reality*, at the opening of Aorta, June 12, 1982. Photo by Marijke ter Rele, archive Peter Giele. Source: Harry Heyink, e a. (eds), *Peter L.M. Giele: Verzamelende Werken*, Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Aksant, 2003: 38-39.

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SUMMARY

Disruptive Attitudes: Artists Counter the Art of Exhibiting in the Low Countries (1985-1991)

This dissertation looks at pivotal exhibitions of the mid-1980s in the Low Countries – Flanders and the Netherlands – to examine strategies devised by artists to take control over conditions that shape the appearance and reception of their work. Reflecting upon the pioneering work of artists from decades prior (who would, around this time, be associated with the term 'institutional critique'), by the mid-1980s artists were cognizant of the mechanisms by which art is framed, reproduced, and distributed. By this time, breaking art out of the systems that bestowed value upon it proved increasingly untenable, but taking an ideological standpoint within its institutions seemed equally disingenuous.

Following research into the history of exhibitions in archives and libraries in both the Netherlands and Belgium, key exhibitions – symptomatic of the challenges facing artists at this time – were chosen. Whenever possible, interviews were conducted with artists and curators involved. These interviews offered first-hand accounts, elucidated literary sources, and provided insight into the intentionality of those who played a part in the fruition of these decisive exhibitions.

By 1985, when this dissertation picks up, the situation of contemporary art in Flanders and the Netherlands had changed dramatically from previous decades. A reduction in the governmental support of artists on the one hand, and an increasing influence of private funders in art's institutions, had altered the game. New conditions called for new strategies that would enable artists to assert control over the mediation of ther work. These strategies reflect the social, political, and technological conditions in which the artists were living. The disruptive attitudes of artists as diverse as Guillaume Bijl, Barbara Bloom, Daniel Buren, Ulises Carrión, Fortuyn/O'Brien, Jef Geys, General Idea, Gerald Van Der Kaap, Barbara Kruger, and Wim T. Schippers, stand out in essential, yet under-investigated exhibitions of this time. These artists were responding to the framing apparatus, and as such, the exhibitions for which they produced works are an essential context.

Study of these exhibitions suggests that critical practice in the Low Countries did not cease to exist in the 1980s, but shifted in format and approach from that exercised in earlier decades. Certain tendencies of critical practice, including its vital relationship to new media, mass media, secondary modes of production, medium specificity, and site specificity come to the fore. A productive tension can be observed between artists and institutions that pushes forward new strategies for disruption.

This research addresses a pressing debate on the importance of a cultural policy that provides ample governmental support to artists to explore critical and innovative projects, offering essential historical and political context. It offers evidence that the mid-1980s was a transitional moment in the Netherlands and Flanders – in terms of critical engagement, institutional conditions, and cultural policies – and is therefore crucial for those seeking to understand the shifting structures in which art and artists operate at present. This re-reading of the 1980s asserts that critical artistic practice was alive and well in the Low Countries, though it has been largely overlooked by scholars. Artists that have made substantial contributions to the mid-1980s have been reassessed in this dissertation, looking back with the critical distance provided by three decades of history. Furthermore, in its challenge to the terms by which critique and its implications are defined, this dissertation has significance for geographic regions and time periods well beyond the Low Countries suggesting that critique may be found in places still under-recognized by art historians.

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